Lives, Places and Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods

Rethinking Civic Engagement in Later Life

written by
Bas Dikmans

Lives, Places and Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods: Rethinking Civic Engagement in Later Life

Dissertation

by Bas Dikmans

to obtain the degree of Doctor in Adult Educational Sciences

at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB)

to be defended in private

on Friday 3 October 2025, at 15.00 hours

and in public

on Tuesday 4 November 2025, at 17.00 hours

Supervisors

Prof. dr. Sarah Dury, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium (VUB)

Prof. dr. Liesbeth De Donder, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium (VUB)

Prof. dr. Rodrigo Serrat, Universitat de Barcelona, Spain (UB)

Doctoral guidance committee

Dr. Allison Smith, Director of research and insight at the Royal Voluntary Service, London, United Kingdom

Doctoral chair

Prof. Dr. Geert Vandermeersche, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium (VUB)

Jury committee

Prof. Dr. Joachim Cohen, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium (VUB)

Dr. Daan Duppen, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium (VUB)

Prof. Dr. Maja Ročak, Zuyd Hogeschool, Sittard, the Netherlands

Prof. dr. An-Sofie Smetcoren, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium (VUB)

Prof. dr. Sandra Torres, Uppsala Universitet, Sweden (UU)

This dissertation was supported by the project **CIVEX: 'Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Features, experiences, and policy implications'**, led by Dr. Rodrigo Serrat (University of Barcelona) and funded through the Joint Programme Initiative: More Years, Better Lives. This PhD dissertation was also made possible by funding from the Belgian Science Policy Office (B2/21E/P3/CIVEX).

Samenvatting (Nederlands)

Maatschappelijk engagement heeft veel positieve effecten op zowel het welzijn van ouderen als de gemeenschappen waarin zij leven. De meeste studies naar maatschappelijk engagement onder ouderen richten zich echter op persoonlijke motivaties of uitkomsten, en negeren de rol die plaatsen en buurtomgevingen spelen. In dit proefschrift wil ik de uiteenlopende ervaringen van ouderen met maatschappelijk engagement op latere leeftijd onderzoeken en inzicht krijgen in het maatschappelijke engagement van ouderen door de tijd heen en op verschillende plaatsen. Hiervoor hanteer ik een omgevings- en levensloopbenadering. De focus ligt op de ervaringen van ouderen in achtergestelde stedelijke buurten en ouderen met een niet-Europese migratieachtergrond, groepen die doorgaans ondervertegenwoordigd zijn in academisch onderzoek. Maatschappelijk engagement op latere leeftijd wordt gedefinieerd als multidimensionaal, en omvat zowel formele vormen van engagement (zoals vrijwilligerswerk, lidmaatschap van verenigingen en formele politieke participatie) als informele vormen (zoals het bieden van informele hulp en informele politieke participatie, waaronder deelname aan protesten of het ondertekenen van petities), inclusief digitaal maatschappelijk engagement. De bevindingen van het proefschrift richten zich op: 1) de noodzaak om het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen breed te definiëren, 2) het wederkerige karakter van dit engagement: het wordt zowel beïnvloed door buurtfactoren als dat het bijdraagt aan veranderingen daarin, 3) de uiteenlopende betekenissen en ervaringen van maatschappelijk engagement tussen verschillende groepen ouderen, en 4) de manier waarop plaatsen veranderen en hoe deze veranderingen verbonden zijn met maatschappelijk engagement op latere leeftijd. Implicaties voor beleid en praktijk zijn onder meer de cruciale rol van buurtorganisaties, het belang van informele relaties en hulp, en hoe plaats een term is met verschillende invullingen, wanneer het gaat om het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen.

Acknowledgments

First of all, a word of praise for the strongest woman I know: **Oma Riet**, you have played a key role in my success. This dissertation is dedicated to you. **Oma Jessie, Opa Sjef**, who sadly passed away during the last four years, this work is just as well yours.

In the same vein, **Ella**, **Oscar** and **our son-to-be**, you are my world, my foundation, my steady ground. You are the guiding light in the dark. I know it may not have always seemed that way. Over the past years, I have often been lost in my own head, which is my safety mechanism. But please know that it was most of all you who kept me going, and who gave me strength when I needed it. You deserve all the love and gratitude in the world, far more than these few words can ever express. *I love you so much*.

Equally, I want to acknowledge and give a very warm word of thanks for the time, energy, and enthusiasm that **the older adults who participated in this research** invested before, during, and after the life-story interviews. Equally, **the local partners** who acted as gatekeepers and who opened their doors for me, deserve a genuine word of thanks. Without their support and engagement, this study would not have seen the light of day. A sincere "thank you" to who helped me along the way:

Lokaal Dienstencentrum Cosmos (Aïcha, Mark and Paul)**, Maison Biloba Huis** (Amaury, Gladys, Nathalie, Ousmane and Sarah)**, Accolage** (Florence and Meriem)**, Cultureghem** (Barbara)**, Familiehulp Brussel** (Dominique)**, Local de Quartier/Wijklokaal Brabantwijk** (Marianne)**, Lokaal Dienstencentrum De Kaai** (Jo and Sanne)**, Medikuregem** (Nicholas)**, Metiss'ages** (Habiba)**, Parckfarm** (Alessio)

To all three of **my supervisors**, a heartfelt thank you for guiding me so well along the way. **Sarah**, whenever I could not see the way forward, you always had a plan. Your vision, strategic sense, and, most of all, your compassion and warmth played a huge role in keeping me going throughout these years. Thanks for the great conversations and friendship. **Liesbeth**, your critical and constructive mindset helped me to bring out the

best in myself, and you showed me that good academic work can only be done through sincere collaboration. I consider this to be one of the most important lessons I have learned during my PhD period. **Rodrigo**, even though you were far away for most of those four years, you always felt close by. Thank you for inviting me to Barcelona, for always being available despite the distance and your busy schedule, and for guiding me not only through my own PhD journey but also through the CIVEX project. The three of you complemented each other. I could not have hoped for better mentors.

Furthermore, I want to acknowledge and thank the jury members for the time and effort they devoted to reading and evaluating my work. **Joachim**, **Daan**, **An-Sofie**, **Maja**, and **Prof. Torres**, my deepest gratitude for your critical assessment. In the same spirit, **Geert**, thank you for being such a thoughtful and kind chair. Furthermore, I am indebted to **Allison Smith** and her wonderful support during my doctoral guidance committees.

For **Thomas** and **Sander**, the design wizards who helped me with the cover: so happy with the result! My eternal gratitude.

I would also like to thank all my (former) colleagues, both at the VUB and in the CIVEX project. There are too many of you to mention by name, but for four years we have been in the same boat together. Sometimes we had the wind in our sails, and sometimes we almost sank, but look at all of us now, reaching the shore one by one. ☺ A special word of thanks to **Toon**, my partner in crime throughout these four formative years, and who, during the job interviews, lent me his pen. Without him (and his pen), I would not be standing here today. Toon, it was a pleasure to get to know you, you are really the best.

And last but certainly not least, thank you to everyone who has pulled me through and made my life so much better. **Mama**, **Papa**, **Mirte**, **Jerome**, **my soon-to-be-born nephew or niece**, and all the rest of the family, but also **Koen** and **Katia**, **Flaminio** and **Cleo**, **Paco**, **Moris**, **Apollo**, **Momo**, and my closest friend, **Mbarak**: family is what truly matters in this world, and I am deeply grateful to have you around me. Finally, a big shout-out to all my other friends, who have stood by me and supported me along the way. You have made this journey lighter, easier, and far more meaningful.

Table of contents

I never said you had to offer me a second chance
I never said I was a victim of circumstance
I still belong
Don't get me wrong
And you can speak your mind, but not on my time

My Life – Billy Joel (1978)

Ain't no church bells ringing
Ain't no flags unfurled
It's just me and you and the love we're bringing
Into the real world

Real World – Bruce Springsteen (1992)

It says "Home is where your heart is", but what a shame
'Cause everyone's heart doesn't beat the same
It's beating out of time

Jesus of Suburbia – Green Day (2004)

PART 1:

BACKGROUND

Chapter 1:
General introduction

Chapter 1:
General introduction

The civic engagement of older adults has become an important topic of discussion in policy, practice and academia. It is seen as a way of tackling social exclusion (Walsh et al., 2021) or promoting age-friendly communities (Buffel et al., 2024). The term is celebrated by those who see it as a hallmark of participatory democracy (Becker, 2023). Others criticize it for being so broad and vague that it lacks analytical value, rendering it essentially a hollow concept into which academics and practitioners unreflectively project their ideals and ambitions (e.g., Berger, 2009). Nevertheless, civic engagement is a term that has survived decades of academic scrutiny, and it remains an important concept for understanding how people, young and old, are involved within their communities or societies (D'eer et al., 2022).

Moreover, as the global population is aging (Chan and Cao, 2015), social scientists have become increasingly interested in studying how older adults in diverse contexts civically engage or encounter obstacles to their civic engagement (Serrat, 2025). Yet, this is a time and age in which the study of civic engagement in later life tends to be biased towards studying the individual (Dury et al., 2020), overlooking the fact that not everybody is equally capable of engaging, and that older adults might face environmental barriers to their civic engagement. In this light, scholars have raised some important and 'big' questions that this dissertation focuses on, such as: How do living environments, such as neighborhoods and urban areas, connect to older adults' civic engagement? And how do social categories, such as socio-economic disadvantage, long-term residency, or migration history relate to opportunities for and restrictions to civic engagement in later life?

Scholars have extensively studied how individual factors including personal motivation (e.g., self-interest and personal growth), values (e.g., standing up for a cause in which one believes), or level of education (e.g., older adults with higher levels of education tend to engage more in formal civic activities [Ackermann, 2019]) play a role in older

adults' engagement in civic activities (Einolf and Chambré, 2011; Serrat and Villar, 2016). In addition, scholars have paid attention to the individual outcomes following civic engagement on older adults' lives, such as personal benefits (e.g., positive effects on mental well-being [Lühr et al., 2022] and improved physical health [Burr et al., 2018]).

Studies have equally examined how features influencing civic engagement vary across national contexts, including a country's economic wealth or socio-political context (Morawski et al., 2020; Nyqvist et al., 2024). For instance, Henriksen et al. (2019) attribute the fact that Northern European countries demonstrate relatively higher civic engagement involvement than their Southern European counterparts to societal and institutional factors and inclusive policies fostering this engagement. Liberal regimes in the north of Europe exhibit higher participation rates because of expanded civil liberties and higher rates of government social spending, while, generally, in countries that attribute fewer public funds to civic engagement, the gap between informal help and formal volunteering activities is smaller (Näsman et al., 2025). Nevertheless, there is some nuance to this: Baer et al. (2016), for instance, show how higher welfare state spending can lead to increased formal volunteering among individuals with lower income or education levels, while this relationship appears to be less pronounced for those with higher income or education.

In short, it becomes clear that both individual and society-related features that relate to civic engagement in later life have been well studied by scholars interested in civic engagement in later life. What is often overlooked and remains to be more deeply studied in relation to civic engagement in later life is what is in between the personal and the societal, namely people's direct living environment, local contexts where people reside and spend time (Vercauteren et al., 2025). This in-between sphere can be represented by the neighborhood, and is often referred to in the literature as the meso level, distinguishing it from the micro (individual) and the macro (societal) level (Greenfield et al., 2019). Some neighborhood-related features have been studied in relation to civic engagement in later life, including how interpersonal relations and community dynamics (Greenfield et al., 2019), or the availability of amenities and services (Lu et al., 2021),

shape older adults' civic engagement. The other way around, older adults' civic engagement in their neighborhoods might strengthen generative and support activities for the benefit of one's community (Vega-Tinoco et al., 2024).

But neighborhoods are not set in stone, especially in cities, where inequality between areas is often pronounced and easily observable (Soja, 2010). As civic engagement is often seen as a way for older adults to raise their voice (Torres, 2021), it is pivotal to ask ourselves how older adults in disadvantaged contexts, whose voices are largely excluded in academic debates (Harris and Roose, 2013; Maciel and Moura, 2023), understand their civic engagement. Moreover, this is important in the here and now, but it is equally salient to understand how civic engagement opportunities and the inequalities regarding access to these opportunities are not solely reflections of what is currently happening: they also take root, endure and change during the life course (Krause, 2011).

This dissertation presents one methodological chapter, three empirical chapters and one conceptual chapter, and engages with different life-course and environmental lenses that can be used to study older adults' civic engagement in urban contexts, with a focus on disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and older migrants. Moreover, this PhD dissertation makes use of a multidimensional approach to civic engagement in later life. This multidimensional approach is aimed at deconstructing narrow, normative definitions of civic engagement through taking a broad perspective, incorporating formal and informal political and volunteering activities, which can be both digital and in person (Serrat, 2025).

This chapter starts with a discussion of frameworks of "active aging" and "healthy aging", which are two evolving paradigms that have been dominant in the way we think about aging, and, consequently, how the bulk of scholars has approached civic engagement in later life. Afterwards, the theoretical approaches guiding this dissertation will be introduced, based on life-course theory and environmental gerontological perspectives. These perspectives will be shortly examined within the context of civic engagement in later life and disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. A literature review concerning civic engagement in later life, which provides a rationale for, and overview of, the

dissertation's multidimensional framework will be given. Equally, I will revisit research on the neighborhood and civic engagement, together with a description of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and consequently touch upon what the literature says about older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. At the end of the chapter, I will identify knowledge gaps, and describe the research aims of this dissertation. This introduction concludes with an outline, completed by short descriptions of the research objectives of each paper in this dissertation.

1. From "active aging" to "healthy aging"

As the global population is living longer, civic engagement in later life as a policy discourse has steadily gained momentum as a way of facing and mitigating the challenges connected to population aging (Chan and Cao, 2015). In the wake of the 21st century, the WHO proposed their "active aging framework" that has influenced hegemonic ideas about a healthy later life, with an emphasis on "maintaining autonomy and independence" (WHO, 2002). As a result, public and political debates started to incorporate this particular discourse about aging, suggesting that being active is something most of us should aspire to do, also in later life (Liang and Luo, 2012).

Active aging is, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002), "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (p.12). Active aging allows people to realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the life course and to participate in society, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they need it. In addition, the WHO underlines that interdependence with other people (family, neighbors, work associates and friends) and intergenerational solidarity are important tenets of active aging. In 2012, the designation of the "European Year for Active Aging and Solidarity between Generations" contributed to establishing the "active aging" framework as a prominent policy agenda across Europe (AGE platform Europe, 2012; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2015).

Nevertheless, this framework has received considerable critique. A major concern was that it is embedded in a neoliberal logic. A key and recurring critique of this paradigm is that it presents an overly optimistic and individualized perspective on the aging process, often overlooking the structural and contextual barriers that hinder sustained societal engagement (Van Dyk et al., 2013). In other words, the responsibility for remaining active lies, in this framework, primarily with individuals, and not their environments. The influence of this framework is present in numerous examples of practical and policy discussions on civic engagement, in which civic engagement in later life is seen as a personal responsibility in which the responsibility of local, regional and national governments to provide the resources and structures necessary to do so is conveniently overlooked (Asquith, 2009). As an example, in the Netherlands, there is ongoing debate about the so-called "participatie-samenleving" (literal translation: participation-society) that accentuates being "a good citizen" through remaining self-sufficient and autonomous in later life (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Following these critiques, a shift has taken place within the WHO. The term "healthy aging" began to gradually replace "active aging" (WHO, 2020). Although the term is still inspired by neoliberal principles (through an emphasis on maintaining "functional ability" or optimizing "intrinsic capacity" in later life), it is also informed by more context-embedded theoretical approaches, such as the "capability approach" (Grove, 2025; Stephens, 2016) and health geography (Ward et al., 2024), that emphasize how health and well-being in later life are as much shaped by broader environmental factors as by one's home or private context. In coordination with this shift, the United Nations have declared the current decade (2021-2030) as the "UN Decade of Healthy aging" (WHO, 2020). Integral to this shift are some important changes in discourse. For one, diversity and inequity in aging have come more to the fore, highlighting the differential influences that gender, ethnicity or socio-economic disadvantage might have on experiences of aging (Rudnicka et al., 2020). Second, in the "healthy aging" paradigm, aging experiences are increasingly considered to be influenced by contextual factors, such as the living environment, which includes neighborhoods and communities (Jiang et al., 2023).

As such, this dissertation engages with discussions that derive from this framework of "healthy aging". In this dissertation, I aim to better understand the environmental features that play a role in understanding civic engagement in later life. Moreover, I start from the idea that civic engagement can be a means for older adults to achieve wellbeing in later life (Nieboer and Cramm, 2018), but that individuals have differential access to civic engagement opportunities. This is particularly the case for older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Parekh et al., 2018; Van der Greft, 2024). Consequently, the quest of this dissertation is to explore how older adults speak about how environmental features interrelate with their civic engagement.

2. Theoretical perspectives on civic engagement in later life

In this part, I will explain the theoretical ideas underpinning this PhD. These theoretical ideas are introduced in general terms to avoid overlap with what follows in the next chapters. The principal goal in this introduction is therefore to briefly state my theoretical positionality as a researcher, while **Chapter 7** at the end of this dissertation deals with a more elaborate discussion of the different theoretical approaches that might inform research on the civic engagement of older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in the future.

First, I will look more closely at a life-course perspective regarding civic engagement in later life. Second, I will briefly introduce environmental gerontology. Using these two theoretical perspectives, I will explore how civic engagement in later life and the neighborhood environment can be seen as dynamically intertwined through time.

2.1. Life-course theory

Studies on civic engagement in later life predominantly discuss the present reasons why older adults engage in civic activities (Dury et al., 2016), while neglecting the impact of the life course on shaping civic engagement in later life (Serrat et al., 2020). A life-course perspective focuses on the different forces that, when combined, constitute an individual's life course (Elder, 1994). These forces consist of individual agency and

choices made at a certain point in time, the institutional context in which a person's life has been embedded, the timing of lives, the specific macro context in which life trajectories unfold, and an individual's social and family context, among others (Dewilde, 2003: Elder, 1994; Giele and Elder, 1998; Silverstein and Garrusso, 2011). In short, an examination of the life course highlights how older adults' current experiences are shaped by life events, transitions and trajectories (Elder, 1994; Milne, 2022). These events and transitions can be represented by retirement, bereavement, or changing health issues throughout the life course (Giele and Elder, 1998; Silverstein and Garrusso, 2011). Moreover, scholars repeatedly demonstrate the need for looking at the life course to understand features of inequality, oppression, and exclusion in later life (Reyes, 2022).

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the dynamics of civic engagement in later life, it is therefore crucial to consider how older adults talk about life-course changes, and to understand how these changes connect to opportunities for civic engagement in earlier and later life. Older adults might change civic activities through time, for instance from associational membership earlier in life to informal help later in life, and it might be insightful to understand what the mechanisms of these changes are through time. Yet, for now, most studies on older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are cross-sectional, providing a snapshot of civic engagement at a specific point in time (Dikmans et al., 2025), and research that look at older adults' civic engagement from a life-course perspective is virtually non-existent.

Furthermore, neighborhoods have life courses too as they are not static but dynamic entities. This way of thinking is called "the life course of place" (Lekkas, 2017; Walsh, 2024). For example, in the case of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, Krause's (2011) study uses a life-course approach to explore how changing environmental contexts play a role in enabling or inhibiting the informal help of older residents. This "life course of place" approach is described in more detail in **Chapter 7** and might provide interesting new insights into how civic engagement in later life evolves and adapts following neighborhood transitions.

2.2. Environmental gerontology

This dissertation also makes use of an environmental gerontological theoretical approach to study civic engagement in later life. Environmental gerontology emphasizes the relationship between individuals and the contextual pressures of their environment (Diaz Moore, 2014; Wahl and Gerstorf, 2020; Wahl et al., 2012). Overall, three ontological evolutions have guided theory around person-place relationships in environmental gerontology (Oswald et al., 2024), beginning with interactional approaches in the 1960s. This approach emphasizes the contextual pressures of place in shaping the lives of older adults. The interactional paradigm was essential for understanding the way in which socio-spatial changes of a place or environment affect older adults' feeling of belonging to that place. This perspective is still relevant today among scholars. For example, Ghrinsteyn and Sugar (2021) studied how perceived neighborhood safety shapes older adults' volunteering activities in their neighborhoods, suggesting that when older adults perceive their neighborhoods as safe, they are increasingly likely to take up community volunteering roles.

Interactional perspectives eventually blended with transactional perspectives, which focused more on how older adults transact with their environment through a complex and dynamic process involving agency and belonging (Hand et al., 2020). For instance, through their civic engagement, older adults can strengthen their attachment to place, such as the neighborhoods or cities they live in, by actively transforming these neighborhoods and communities for the better (Hand et al., 2020; Grinshteyn and Sugar, 2021).

Finally, co-constitutional approaches further developed transactional approaches. Co-constitutional approaches focus on the complex and ongoing bi-directional definition and re-definition of person and place. An example of this co-constitutional approach is Greenfield et al.'s (2019) community gerontology, arguing that neighborhoods are constantly evolving through interactions with individuals and the broader society, which will also be described in **Chapter 7** of this book. In short, through incorporating an environmental perspective, I aim to do justice to how neighborhoods not only influence

older adults' lives, but also how older adults contribute to changing their neighborhoods through their civic engagement (Gott et al., 2024) and how this takes shape through time.

3. Defining civic engagement in later life

Understanding civic engagement in later life has become a pressing issue, and a growing body of work has focused on the civic engagement of older adults in recent years (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Nyqvist et al., 2024; Serrat, 2025). However, the term civic engagement is believed to be a container concept that comprises a wide array of activities, which can be either socially or politically oriented (Serrat et al., 2021). Moreover, the literature around civic engagement is scattered across an umbrella of related and quasi-similar terms, including community participation (Cheung and Mui, 2023; Sundar et al., 2016), social engagement or participation (Reinhard et al., 2018; Van der Greft, 2024), or citizen engagement (Adshead et al., 2020).

Political engagement is often seen as closely intertwined with civic engagement, and in studies that approach civic engagement through a political lens, civic engagement is often seen as a set of activities that is primarily intended to have an impact on policies at different levels (e.g., Anderson, 2023; Bemudez, 2012; Dinnar and Nossek, 2019). Nevertheless, in the United States of America, Putnam (2000) described, in his landmark study, a decline of political engagement, while acknowledging the rise of different other forms of civic engagement, such as community work, volunteering or (online) activism. In response, research started to highlight other dimensions of older adults' civic engagement as well, such as helping a neighbor (Hand et al., 2020), being digitally active (Kebede et al., 2021) and participating in or being a member of community associations (Buffel et al., 2014).

Many contemporary definitions of civic engagement have shifted from emphasizing formal and political dimensions towards using a broader conceptualization. For instance, Becker (2023) sees civic engagement as "recurrent and purposeful efforts by members of a community, who through their voluntary interaction with others, seek to promote the common good – locally, nationally, or globally – by means of political and non-political

processes and actions" (p. 11). In another example, the American Political Science Association (APSA) defines civic engagement as:

> *"Participating in and seeking to influence the life of the community, where the community can be at any scale, from neighborhood to world. Civic engagement can be political, but it need not be. For example, students may turn out to clean a beach or a river bank on a community service day; this will improve the life of a community, but will not change a policy or call for state action"* (APSA, 2013, p.1).

In both definitions, the focus is not primarily on political civic activities (i.e., those activities aimed at influencing political decision-making), but they rather treat political engagement as just one dimension among others. However, these definitions still subtly elevate political actions over other civic activities. In the first example, this is the most evident: political activities are grouped together and contrasted with other forms of engagement under the broad category of 'non-political'.

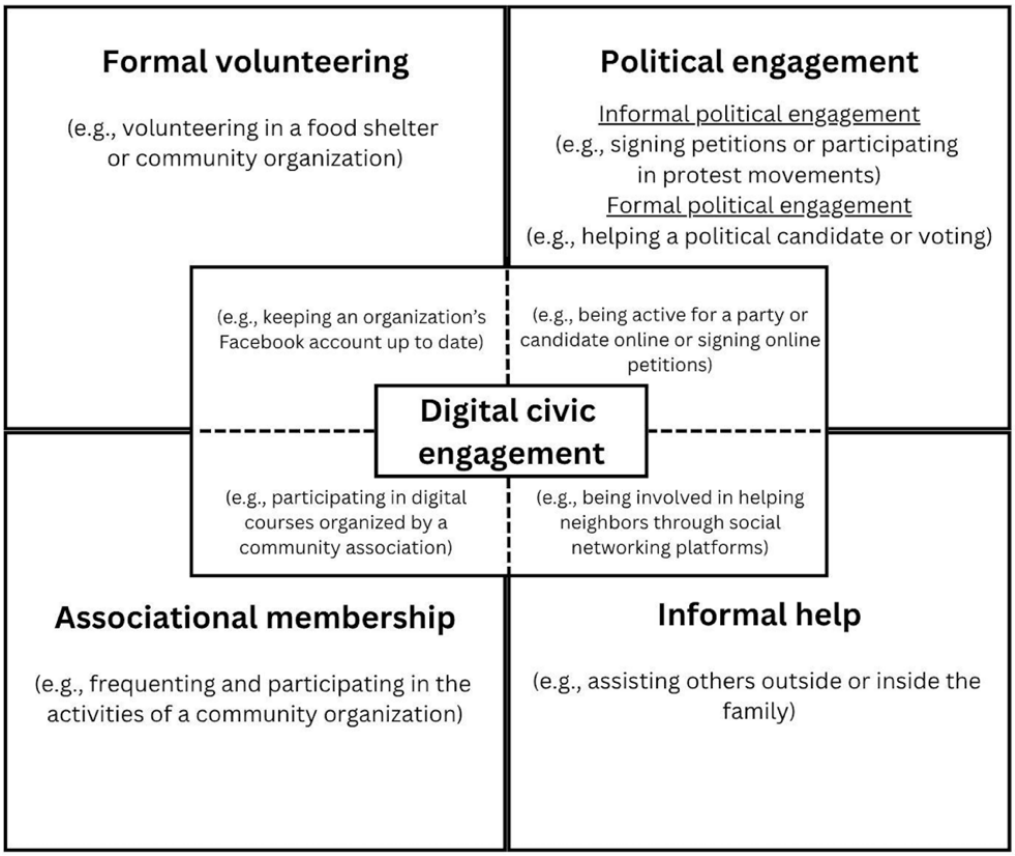
In the case of older adults, civic engagement can be both political (i.e., as an important tool for exercising citizenship rights and remaining involved in decision-making processes [Torres, 2021]), and social (i.e., as a way of contributing to their neighborhoods and communities [Martins et al., 2021]). Traditionally, studies on civic engagement in later life have focused mainly on formal civic engagement, with formal volunteering being the most studied dimension, while neglecting other ways in which older adults contribute to their communities (Burr et al., 2018; Serrat et al., 2020). This dissertation aims to do justice to civic engagement in later life as a broad and multi-faceted category.

In this dissertation, I take inspiration from the multidimensional definition of Serrat et al. (2022), who provide a description of civic engagement that does not prioritize political participation over other forms, while taking a more inclusive approach to the boundless ways civic engagement in later life can be interpreted. Serrat et al. (2022) define the term as all "unpaid, non-professional activities aimed at seeking improved benefits for others, the community, or wider society, or influencing collective decision-making processes"

(p. 621). This definition broadens the concept and also draws attention to its political embeddedness, prompting reflection on what is typically included or excluded from conventional understandings of the term.

Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual framework of civic engagement in later life that underpins this study. As civic engagement can be practiced in both formal and informal contexts (Burr et al., 2018; Kruse and Schmitt 2015), a broader conceptualization of civic engagement in later life will be used in this dissertation, encompassing formal volunteering (e.g., volunteering in a food shelter or community organization), associational membership (e.g., frequenting and participating in the activities of a community organization), informal help (e.g., assisting others outside or inside the family), formal political engagement (e.g., helping a political candidate or voting) and informal political engagement (e.g., signing petitions or participating in protest movements) (Serrat et al., 2020).

Figure 1.1: A conceptualization of civic engagement in later life, in which the 4 dimension have both digital and real-life manifestations.



Digital civic engagement is another important dimension of civic engagement in later life that is often overlooked (Belina, 2022; Nelson et al., 2017). I have therefore included this dimension as well. Because most definitions of civic engagement were developed before the advent of the internet, they often do not consider the many new ways of participating that have become possible through digital technologies (Serrat, 2025). Digital civic engagement can be embedded in all of the dimensions previously outlined, such as formal and informal political engagement (e.g., being active for a party or candidate online or signing online petitions), formal volunteering (e.g., keeping an organizations' Facebook account up to date), associational membership (e.g., participating in digital courses organized by a community association), and informal help (e.g., being involved in helping neighbors through social networking platforms).

4. Neighborhoods as sites for civic engagement in later life

Academic interest for civic engagement and the neighborhood has increased during the last decades, because of a growing realization that neighborhoods are an important context for civic engagement across all age groups (e.g., Dang et al., 2022; Irani et al., 2023; Matthews, 2023). Moreover, for many older adults, the neighborhood may become increasingly central as they age, making participation in nearby activities preferable (Genge et al., 2023).

Older adults' civic engagement is shaped by their neighborhood environment as neighborhoods can promote access to or pose barriers to their civic activities (Dury et al., 2016; 2020; Wahl and Gerstorf, 2020). For instance, cohesive neighborhoods spur engagement in later life (Townsend et al., 2021), while adverse changes in the neighborhood environment, such as an increase of public unsafety or a decline of physical neighborhood assets that spur formal engagement activities, often have negative implications for older adults' civic engagement in their neighborhoods (Buffel et al., 2023). Nonetheless, perceived neighborhood problems might also inspire civic engagement in later life (Cheung and Mui, 2023).

Many studies emphasize how neighborhood conditions shape civic engagement. Fewer, however, acknowledge the myriad ways in which older adults themselves shape these environments (Reuter et al., 2019). This can be done through helping neighbors, volunteering and sometimes even political advocacy (Gott et al., 2024; Hand et al., 2020). As a case in point, Dury et al. (2023) show how, in the case of neighborly informal help, older adults spent more time helping neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic than the rest of the population. Hence, they cannot be uniformly seen as passively undergoing changes in their neighborhoods. The pursuit of this dissertation then is to explore how older adults maintain a dynamic and bi-directional relationship with neighbors, often actively and continuously helping them, and this in the face of neighborhood transformations.

4.1. Disadvantaged urban neighborhoods

The urban context is a relevant theme to study, as the world's population is aging, and most people worldwide, including older adults, live in cities. In 2015, 58% of people aged 60 and over lived in urban areas globally, marking a 7-percentage point rise since 2000. This percentage is projected to grow in the coming decades (World Bank Group, 2022). However, there are several definitions of the term 'urban' and there is no globally agreed upon definition. Some definitions focus on the population size of cities versus rural and peri-urban areas, while others for instance look at primary economic activity (e.g., agriculture versus a service-oriented economy) (Tandel et al., 2019). Moreover, definitions of what the urban is change through time, from Marxist approaches highlighting class struggles against bourgeois society (Rossi, 2019) to Lefebvre's (1968) essay on "right to the city" and adherents who refined these theoretical ideas (see **Chapter 7** in this dissertation for a more detailed overview).

Cities do not provide equal opportunities for everyone to participate, with older adults facing particular forms of social exclusion in urban environments. Cities are in general designed with a younger, working population in mind, and not older adults (Buffel and Phillipson, 2023). Joy (2020) lists the recurrent issues that older adults face globally in urban environments, including exclusion from civic engagement. Her other concerns

revolve around discrimination through ageism, a dearth of socializing activities with for instance family, friends or neighbors, disappearing community support and public health services, a lack of available and affordable housing, not having user-friendly and payable transport options, absent outdoor spaces, restrictive public buildings which are tailored for a younger population, and inaccessible communication channels. As these examples show, cities can be highly segregated spaces, giving rise to social distance between groups of people through the formation of space (Netto, 2010).

When it comes to differences between urban neighborhoods, the literature classifies neighborhoods based on several indicators. Amongst these classifications, disadvantage is a common term. Nevertheless, disadvantage is a broad term that can be defined in a variety of ways. When it comes to area-based disadvantage, scholars highlight an area's vulnerability to disasters (Bakkensen et al., 2017), area health-related factors, such as prevalence of cardiovascular diseases and diabetes (Kind et al., 2018) or area poverty levels (Powell et al., 2001). Disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are frequently characterized in the literature by various socio-economic and socio-political challenges. These areas often experience high unemployment rates, low educational attainment, and a predominance of rental housing over home ownership. Property values tend to be low, and the media often portrays these neighborhoods in a negative light, emphasizing gang-related and drug-related crimes. Additionally, these areas may struggle with inadequate housing conditions, homelessness, chronic alcoholism, a high turnover of residents, and a significant proportion of older residents who are sick or disabled. Other recurring indicators include a high number of lone-parent households with dependent children and broader issues of social and economic instability, all of which fluctuate over time (Scharf et al., 2005; Smith, 2009; Scharf et al., 2021).

Disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are characterized by several interlinked socio-physical environmental challenges as well. For instance, residents can be confronted with institutional abandonment, such as the limited availability of services or amenities, including a reduced voluntary sector (Bezzo et al., 2023; Rae et al., 2016). In addition, disadvantaged urban neighborhoods generally lack green spaces, such as parks and gardens, adversely impacting the well-being of residents (Jamalishahni et al., 2023).

4.2. Older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods

Empirical studies that examine older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, often set in either the United Kingdom and the United States of America (e.g., Bezzo et al., 2023; McBride et al., 2006; Scharf et al., 2005), tend to study civic engagement as a peripheral issue, and not as a central concept of analysis. As a result, civic engagement in later life is often seen as one dimension of the broader issue of social exclusion. For instance, older adults in disadvantaged areas are at a higher risk of social exclusion in a range of domains, including social networks, social relations and social or civic engagement (Buffel et al., 2023; Prattley, 2020; Walsh et al., 2017).

Extant research dealing with environmental or neighborhood-level facilitators and barriers perceived by older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods to their civic engagement might for instance look at a (lack of) encouragement by peers or (in)adequate transport systems and accessibility (Liljas et al., 2017). They might also study how adverse neighborhood changes curb social cohesion and reciprocal support relations among residents (Prattley et al., 2020). The socio-physical and socio-economic dynamics within disadvantaged urban neighborhoods therefore seem to have adverse implications for older adults' civic engagement, but, while these studies are valuable, they are not manifold.

Conversely, research suggests that older adults who live in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods might also be more resilient to neighborhood stressors than older adults living in more better-off neighborhoods (Schäfer, 2017), and that disadvantaged urban neighborhoods may also be characterized by strong local ties and reciprocal informal support (Finlay et al., 2022; Padeiro et al., 2022). How residence in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood might foster certain forms of civic engagement, and the mechanisms underlying this, is an important theme that this dissertation will explore.

5. Knowledge gaps, research principles and questions

Despite the growing research interest in civic engagement in later life, older adults in potentially marginalized contexts are epistemically excluded in mainstream gerontological research. As such, this dissertation critically explores and examines civic engagement in later life taking alternate points of view.

This dissertation aims to address **four** main knowledge gaps in the literature.

First – conceptual breadth – research on civic engagement often lacks conceptual clarity and the need arises to develop a multidimensional understanding of civic engagement. Therefore, I will, in this dissertation, look at civic engagement in later life as multidimensional, in an attempt to go further than definitions that focus solely on formal political and formal volunteering activities, through including informal help, associational membership, and digital civic engagement. For instance, **Chapter 5** will deal with older migrants, a group that is generally excluded from the civic engagement literature, and the central pursuit of this paper is to inspire a broader rethinking of what civic engagement entails.

Second – neighborhood dynamics – there is a lacuna on the role the neighborhood environment plays in older adults' civic engagement. This is particularly the case when it comes to how neighborhood environmental characteristics shape and are shaped by civic engagement in later life. As such, this dissertation will examine how civic engagement in later life and the neighborhood environment are dyadic concepts that can mutually and dynamically shape each other.

Third – diverse populations – there is a knowledge gap on how diverse older populations civically engage and shape their surroundings. This is why two of the three empirical papers of this study (**Chapter 4** and **6**) deal with older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, while, as said, **Chapter 5** focuses on older migrants.

Fourth – life-course and place trajectories – there is a dearth of research on how civic engagement relates to questions of aging and place, especially from a life-course perspective. Consequently, this thesis seeks to gain deeper insight into how places can have life courses of their own and how this "life course of place" (Walsh, 2024) relates to the civic engagement of older adults.

This PhD dissertation formulates **two** broad research aims that the next chapters will engage with in one way or another: **1)** to explore older adults' diverse experiences of civic engagement in later life (focusing on the experiences of older migrants and older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods) and, as such, broaden our understanding of civic engagement in later life beyond dominant groups and contexts, and **2)** to understand the civic engagement of older adults across time and place (focusing on both individual and neighborhood life courses).

6. Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation makes use of five academic papers, written independently from each other between 2022 and 2025: one is a methodological chapter, supporting the methodological approach and focusing on life diagrams as a visual elicitation tool (**Chapter 3**). Three chapters are empirical studies (**Chapter 4, 5** and **6**). One is a theoretical chapter that supports this introduction and details the theoretical approaches that might be used for studying older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (**Chapter 7**). A brief outline of the chapters can be found in **Table 1.1** on the following page.

Table 1.1: Outline of the dissertation.

	Aim	Data	Method	Publication status
PART 1: BACKGROUND				
Chapter 1: General introduction				
PART 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY				
Chapter 2: Methodological approach				
Chapter 3: 'Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for aging and childhood research'	This chapter describes life diagrams as a visual tool for eliciting insights and reflections on the life course, within the context of civic engagement in later life.	NA	NA	Published in *Linking Ages: A Dialogue between Childhood and Ageing Research* edited by A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, F. Oswald
PART 3: EMPIRICAL PAPERS				
Chapter 4: 'Civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods: An environmental perspective'	This chapter examines how older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods discuss their civic engagement as both shaping and being shaped by the neighborhood environment.	60 life-story interviews with older adults (>65 years) living in disadvantaged urban areas in 4 different countries (Belgium, Finland, Spain, Sweden, n=15 per country)	Pre-coding, data extraction, Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2024)	Not submitted
Chapter 5: 'A plurality of place: Towards a more inclusive understanding of older migrants' civic engagement'	This chapter delves into older migrants' civic engagement, and particularly the places they mention as meaningful for their civic engagement.	eight life-story interviews with older non-European migrants (>60 years) living in Belgium	Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2024)	Under review in *Wellbeing, Space and Society*
Chapter 6: '"Life course of place": Older adults' social networks and informal help amidst urban change'	This chapter studies how neighborhood changes have shaped the social networks and informal help of older adults who are long-term residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.	19 life-story interviews with older adults (>60 years) who are long-term residents (>20 years) in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Brussels, Belgium	QUAGOL (Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven) (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012;2021)	Published in *Urban Planning*
PART 4: GENERAL DISCUSSION				
Chapter 7: 'Older people living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods'	This chapter discusses three overlapping theoretical approaches to look at civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, being environmental, life-course and exclusion-based perspectives.	NA	NA	Published in *Civic engagement in later life* edited by R. Serrat
Chapter 8: General discussion				

References

Ackermann, K. (2019). Predisposed to volunteer?: Personality traits and different forms of volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 48*(6), 1119–1142. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019848484

Adshead, M., Boyle, R., Colgan, A. (2020). A review of citizen engagement in our public service. *Administration, 68*(3), 23-44. https://doi.org/10.2478/admin-2020-0014

AGE Platform Europe. (2012, December 7). *2012: a first step towards a truly age-friendly European Union*. https://www.age-platform.eu/2012-a-first-step-towards-a-truly-age-friendly-european-union/

Anderson, L. W. (2023). Civic education, citizenship, and democracy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *31*. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.31.7991

American Political Science Association (APSA). (2013). How to define civic engagement. In *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*. APSA. https://web.apsanet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2017/08/How-to-Define-Civic-Engagement.pdf

Asquith, N. (2009). Positive ageing, neoliberalism and Australian sociology. *Journal of Sociology, 45*(3): 255–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783309335650

Baer, D., Prouteau, L., Swindell, D., Savicka, A., Smith, D.H., & Tai, K-T. (2016). Conducive macro-contexts influencing volunteering. In D.H. Smith, R.A. Stebbins, & J. Grotz (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations* (pp. 580-606). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bakkensen, L.A., Fox-Lent, C., Read, L.K., & Linkov, I. (2017). Validating resilience and vulnerability indices in the context of natural disasters. *Risk Analysis*, *37*, 982-1004. https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12677

Becker, J. (2024). What is civic engagement … and is not (Working Paper No. 2023/10). *Central European University, Democracy Institute: DI Working Papers*. https://democracyinstitute.ceu.edu/sites/default/files/article/attachment/2023-11/Jonathan%20Becker%20What%20Civic%20Engagement%20is%20and%20is%20_not%20CEU%20DI%20WP%20series%202023%2010.pdf

Belina, A. (2022). Digital volunteering through a volunteering crowdsourcing platform: Lessons fromTuDu.org.pl. *Voluntary Sector Review* (published online ahead of print).

Bemudez, A. (2012). Youth civic engagement: Decline or transformation? A critical review. *Journal of Moral Education, 41*, 529-542. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2012.732296

Berger, B. 2009. Political theory, political science, and the end of civic engagement. *Perspectives on Politics, 7*(2), 335-350. https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759270909080X

Bezzo, F.B., & Jeannet, A. M. (2023). Civic involvement in deprived communities: A longitudinal study of England. *British Journal of Sociology*, *74*(5), 837–857. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13024

Braun V., & Clarke V. (2024). Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: A review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). *Palliative Medicine, 38*(6), 608-616. https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163241234800

Buffel, T., de Donder, L., Phillipson, C., Dury, S., de Witte, N., & Verté, D. (2014). Social participation among older adults living in medium-sized cities in Belgium: The role of neighbourhood perceptions. *Health Promotion International, 29*(4), 655-668. https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dat009

Buffel, T., & Phillipson, C. (2023) *Ageing in Place in Urban Environments: Critical Perspectives*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.

Buffel, T., Yarker, S., Phillipson, C., Lang, L., Lewis, C., Doran, P., & Mhorag, G. (2023). Locked down by inequality: Older people and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Urban Stud., 60*(8), 1465-1482. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980211041018

Buffel, T., Doran, P., & Yarker, S. (2024). *Reimagining age-friendly communities*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Burr, J.A, Han, S., Lee, H.J., Tavares, J.L., Mutchler, J.E. (2018). Health benefits associated with three helping behaviors: Evidence for incident cardiovascular disease. *Journals of Gerontology Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences, 73*(3):492-500. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbx082

Chan, A. C.-M., & Cao, T. (2015). Age-friendly neighbourhoods as civic participation: Implementation of an Active Ageing policy in Hong Kong. *Journal of Social Work Practice,* 29(1), 53-68. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2014.993947

Chen, Y. C., Morrow-Howell, N., Hung, N., & Chan, C. L. W. (2023). Civic activities and mental health in later life: The moderating role of generative concerns. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *66*(7), 844–863. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2023.2183297

Cheung, E.S.L., & Mui, A.C. (2023). Home and neighborhood environmental correlates of civic participation among community-dwelling older adults in Canada. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, *38*(4), 2687–2705. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-023-10057-7

D'eer, L., Quintiens, B., Van Den Block, L., Dury, S., Deliens, L., Chambaere, K., Smets, T., & Cohen, J. 2022. Civic engagement in serious illness, death, and loss: A systematic mixed-methods review. *Palliative Medicine, 36*(4), 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163221077850

Dang, L., Seemann, A.-K., Lindenmeier, & J., Saliterer, I. (2022). Explaining civic engagement: The role of neighborhood ties, place attachment, and civic responsibility. *Journal of Community Psychology, 50*(3), 1736-1755. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22751

Dewilde, C. 2003. A life-course perspective on social exclusion and poverty. *British Journal of Sociology, 54*(1): 109-128. https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000045923

Diaz Moore, K. 2014. An ecological framework of place: Situating environmental gerontology within a life course perspective. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 79*(3):183-209. https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.79.3.a

Dierckx de Casterlé, B., De Vliegher, K., Gastmans, C., & Mertens, E. (2021). Complex qualitative data analysis: Lessons learned from the experiences with the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven. *Qualitative Health Research, 31*(6), 1083–1093. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320966981

Dierckx de Casterlé, B., Gastmans, C., Bryon, E., & Denier, Y. (2012). QUAGOL: A guide for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 49*(3), 360–371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2011.09.012

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Older people in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 192-208). Bristol University Press.

Dinnar, S., & Nossek, H. News repertoires, civic engagement and political participation among young adults in Israel. *Communications,* 46(2), 159-184. https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2019-2073

Dury, S., Willems, J., De Witte, N., De Donder, L., Buffel, T., & Verté, D. (2016). Municipality and neighborhood influences on volunteering in later life. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *35*(6), 601-626. https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464814533818

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Smetcoren, A.-S., Van Regenmortel, S. De Witte, N., De Donder, L., & Verté, D. (2020). Pathways to late-life volunteering: A focus on social connectedness. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *49*(3): 523-547. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019881509

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Honghui, P., Principi, A., Smetcoren, A.-S., Perek-Białas, J., De Donder, L. (2023). Helping behavior of older adults during the early COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium. *Research on Aging, 45*(1): 8-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221105231

Einolf, C., & Chambré, & S. M. (2011). Who volunteers? Constructing a hybrid theory. *International Journal of Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 16*, 298-310. https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.429

Elder, G.H. 1994. Time, human agency and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 57*(1): 4-15. https://doi.org/10.2307/2786971

European Parliamentary Research Service. (2015, March). *European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2012): European Implementation Assessment*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/536344/EPRS_IDA(2015)536344_EN.pdf

Finlay, J.M., Meltzer, G., Cannon, M., Kobayashi, L.C. Aging in place during a pandemic: Neighborhood engagement and environments since the COVID-19 pandemic onset. *The Gerontologist*, *62*(4), 504–518. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnab169

Genge, C., McNeil, H., Debergue, P., & Freeman, S. (2023). Technology to support aging in place: Key messages for policymakers and funders. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*:1287486. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1287486

Giele, J.Z., & Elder, G.H. (1998). Life course research: Development of a field. In: J.Z. Giele, G.H. Elder, *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp. 5-27). Sage Publications, Inc.

Gott, M., Wiles, J., Morgan, T., Williams, L., Morgan, K., Black, S., Koh, A., Fanueli, E., Xu, J., Goodwin, H., Pilimatalawwe, D., & Moeke-Maxwell, T. (2024). Older people's contributions during the Covid-19 pandemic response. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 36*(6), 1396–1416. https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2384322

Greenfield, E.A., Black, K., Buffel, T., & Yeh, J. (2019) 'Community gerontology: A framework for research, policy, and practice on communities and aging'. *The Gerontologist*, 59(5), 803– 10. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny089

Grinshteyn, E.G., & Sugar, J.A. (2021). Perceived neighbourhood safety and volunteerism among older adults. *Ageing & Society, 41*: 2914-2932. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20000677

Grove, H. (2025). Ageing well in place: A capability approach. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* (Early View). https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.70013

Hand, C., Laliberte, D.R., Huot, S., Pack, R., & Gilliland, J. (2020). Enacting agency: Exploring how older adults shape their neighbourhoods. *Ageing & Society*, *40*(3), 565–583. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X18001150

Harris, A., & Roose, J. (2014). DIY citizenship amongst young Muslims: Experiences out of the "ordinary". *Journal of Youth Studies*, *17*(6): 794–813. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.844782

Henriksen, L.S., Strømsnes, K., & Svedberg, L. (2019). *Civic engagement in Scandinavia: Volunteering, informal help and giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*. Springer Nature.

Irani, M., Aghdam, S.R., & Ghasemzadeh, B. (2023). Investigating the link between place attachment, civic engagement, and pro-environmental behaviors. *Environmental Development, 47,* 100897. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2023.100897.

Jamalishahni, T., Turrell, G., Foster, S., Davern, M., & Villanueva, K. (2023). Neighbourhood socio-economic disadvantage and loneliness: The contribution of green space quantity and quality. *BMC Public Health, 23,* 598. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15433-0

Jiang, Y., Wu, Y., Li, S., Fu, S., Lv, Y., Lin, H., & Yao, Y. (2023) Editorial: Aging-friendly environments and healthy aging. *Frontiers in Medicine, 10*:1211632. https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2023.1211632

Joy, M. (2020). *The right to an age-friendly city: Redistribution, recognition, and senior citizen rights in urban spaces*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Kebede, A.S., Ozolins, L.L., Holst, H., & Galvin, K. (2021). The digital engagement of older people: Systematic scoping review protocol. *JMIR Research Protocols, 10*(7):e25616. https://www.researchprotocols.org/2021/7/e25616

Kind, A.J.H., & Buckingham, W.R. (2018). Making neighborhood-disadvantage metrics accessible - The Neighborhood Atlas. *New England Journal of Medicine, 378*(26):2456-2458. https://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMp1802313

Krause, N. (2011). Neighborhood conditions and helping behavior in late life. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *31*(1), 62-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.11.003

Kruse, A., & Schmitt, E. (2015). Shared responsibility and civic Engagement in very old age. *Research in Human Development*, *12*(1–2), 133–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2015.1010353

Lefebvre, H. (1968). Le droit à la ville. *Sociologie du Travail*, *10*(4): 456–457.

Lekkas, P., Paquet, C., Howard, N.J. & Daniel, M. (2017). Illuminating the lifecourse of place in the longitudinal study of neighbourhoods and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, *177*, 239-47. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.09.025

Liang, J., Luo, B. (2012). Toward a discourse shift in social gerontology: From successful aging to harmonious aging. *Journal of Aging Studies, 26*(3), 327-334. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2012.03.001

Liljas, A.E.M., Walters, K., Jovicic, A., Ilife, S., Manthorpe, J., & Goodman, C., & Kharicha, K. (2017). Strategies to improve engagement of 'hard to reach' older people in research on health promotion: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 17: 349. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4241-8

Lu, S., Chui, C., Lum, T. (2023). Promoting social capital for healthy aging: Towards an integrative framework. *The Gerontologist*, *63*(4), 628-636. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac062

Lühr, M., Pavlova, M.K. & Luhmann, M. (2022). They are doing well, but is it by doing good?: Pathways from nonpolitical and political volunteering to subjective well-being in age comparison. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 23,* 1969–1989. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00480-4

Maciel, T.F., & Moura, L.B. (2023). Epistemological assumptions of age-friendly cities: A scoping review. *Acta Paulista de Enfermagem, 36*:eAPE00202. http://dx.doi.org/10.37689/acta-ape/2023AR002022

Martins, T.A., Nunes, J.A., Dias, I., & Menezes, I. (2021). Engagement in civic organisations in old age: Motivations for participation and retention. *Journal of Aging Studies, 59*, 100977. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100977

Mathews, M. A. (2020). Toward an understanding of civic engagement capacities within a municipal civic participation system. *The Social Science Journal*, *60*(3), 537–549. https://doi.org/10.1080/03623319.2020.1750122

McBride, A.M., M.S. Sherraden, & S. Pritzker. (2006). Civic engagement among low-income and low-wealth families: In their words. Family Relations, 55(2):152-162. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005326

Milne, A. (2022) The lifecourse and old age. In S. Torres, & S. Donnelly (eds.), *Critical Gerontology for Social Workers* (pp. 19-34). Bristol University Press.

Morawski, L., Okulicz- Kozaryn, A., & Strzelecka, M. (2020). Elderly volunteering in Europe: The relationship between volunteering and quality of life depends on volunteering rates. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 33,* 256– 68. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00267-w

Näsman, M., Nyqvist, F., Nygard, M., Vercauteren, T., Dury, S., & Serrat, R. (2025). Multidimensional civic engagement in later life in 32 European countries: An exploration of the roles of socio-structural resources and welfare state commitment. *Research on Aging*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275251351016

Nelson, J. L., Lewis, D. A., & Lei, R. (2017). Digital democracy in America: A look at

civic engagement in an internet age. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *94*(1), 318-334. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699016681969

Netto, V.M., Paschoalino, R., & Pinheiro, M. (2010). Social networks in the city, or the urban condition of coexistence, *V!RUS, 4* (online). http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus04/?sec=4&item=5&lang=en

Nieboer, A.P., & Cramm, J.M. (2018). Age-friendly communities matter for older people's well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 19*:2405-2420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9923-5

Nyqvist, F., Serrat, R., Nygård, M., & Näsman, M. (2024). Does social capital enhance political participation in older adults?: Multi-level evidence from the European Quality of Life Survey. *European Journal of Ageing, 21*(1), Article 30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-024-00825-x

Oswald, F., Wahl, H.-W., Wanka, A., & Chaudhury, H. (2024). Theorizing place and aging: Enduring and novel issues in environmental gerontology. In M. P. Cutchin & G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 37-60). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Padeiro, M., de São José, J., Amado, C., Sousa, L., Roma Oliveira, C., Esteves, A., & McGarrigle, J. (2021). Neighborhood attributes and well-being among older adults in urban areas: A mixed-methods systematic review. *Research on Aging*, *44*(5-6), 351- 368. https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027521999980

Parekh, R., Maleku, A., Fields, N., Adorno, G., Schuman, D., & Felderhoff, B. (2018). Pathways to age-friendly communities in diverse urban neighborhoods: Do social capital and social cohesion matter?. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 61(5), 492-512. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2018.1454564

Prattley, J., Buffel, T., Marshall, A., & Nazroo, J. (2020). Area effects on the level and development of social exclusion in later life. *Social Science & Medicine*, *246*, 112722. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112722

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.

Powell, M., Boyne, G., & Ashworth, R. (2001). Towards a geography of people poverty and place poverty. *Policy & Politics*, *29*(3), 243-258. https://doi.org/10.1332/0305573012501332

Rae, A., Hamilton, R., Crisp, R., & Powell, R. (2016). *Overcoming deprivation and disconnection in UK cities*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution/overcoming-deprivation-and-disconnection-in-uk-cities

Reinhard, E., Courtin, E., van Lenthe, F.J., Avendano, M. (2018). Public transport policy, social engagement and mental health in older age: A quasi-experimental evaluation of free bus passes in England. *Journal of Epidemiological Community Health, 72*(5):361-368. https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2017-210038

Reuter, A., Bartindale, T., Morrissey, K., Scharf, T., & Liddle, J. (2019). Older voices: Supporting community radio production for civic participation in later life. *Association for Computing Machinery, 434*, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300664

Reyes L. (2022). Experiences of civic participation among older African American and Latinx immigrant adults in the context of an ageist and racist society. *Research on Aging, 45*(1):92-103. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221094288

Rossi, U. (2019). Critical urban theory, in A. Orum (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies* (pp. 1-11). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Rudnicka, E., Napierałab, P., Podfigurnab, A., Męczekalskib, B., Smolarczyka, R., & Grymowicz, M. (2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) approach to healthy ageing. *Maturitas, 139,* 6-11. https://www.maturitas.org/article/S0378-5122(20)30282-6/fulltext

Schäfer, M. H. (2017). (Where) is functional decline isolating? Disordered environments and the onset of disability. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *59*(1), 38-55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146517748411

Scharf, T., Philipson, C., & Smith, A.E. (2005). Social exclusion of older people in deprived urban communities of England. *European Journal of Ageing*, 2, 76-87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-005-0025-6

Scharf, T., Walsh, K., Van Regenmortel, S., & Wanka, A. (2021). Advancing research and policy on social exclusion of older people: Towards a coherent a critical discourse, in K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. Van Regenmortel, A. Wanka (eds.), *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives* (pp. 435-450). Springer, International Perspectives on Aging.

Serrat, R., & Villar, F. (2016). Older people's motivations to engage in political organizations: Evidence from a Catalan study. *Voluntas*, *27*, 1385–1402. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9710-7

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., Villar, F. & Gómez, C. (2020). Fifty-five years of research into older people's civic participation: Recent trends, future directions. *The Gerontologist, 60*(1), e38–e51. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz021

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., & Villar, F. (2021). Reconceptualising exclusion from civic e ngagement in later life: Towards a new research agenda. In K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. Van Regenmortel, A. Wanka (eds.), *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives* (pp. 245-257). Springer, International Perspectives on Aging.

Serrat, R., Scharf, T. & Villar, F. (2022). Mapping Civic Engagement in Later Life: A Scoping Review of Gerontological Definitions and Typology Proposal. *Voluntas, 33*, 615–626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00346-6

Serrat, R. (2025). A conceptual framework to understand civic engagement in later life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 3-19). Bristol University Press.

Silverstein, M., & Giarrusso, R. (2011). Aging individuals, families, and societies: micro–meso– macro linkages in the life course. In R. Settersten, J. Angel (eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Aging: Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research* (pp. 35-49). Springer.

Smith, A.E. (2009). *Ageing in Urban Neighborhoods: Place Attachment and Social Exclusion*. Policy Press.

Soja, E.W. (2010) *Seeking Spatial Justice*. University of Minnesota Press.

Stephens, C. (2016), From success to capability for healthy ageing: Shifting the lens to include all older People. *Critical Public Health, 27*(4), 490–498. https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2016.1192583

Sundar, V., Brucker, D.L., Pollack, M.A., & Chang, H. (2016). Community and social participation among adults with mobility impairments: A mixed methods study. *Disability and Health Journal, 9*(4):682-91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2016.05.006

Tandel, V., Hiranandani, K., & Kapoor, M. (2019). What's in a definition?: A study on the suitability of the current urban definition in India through its employment guarantee programme. *Journal of Asian Economics, 60*, 69-84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asieco.2018.11.001.

Torres, S. (2021). Introduction: Framing civic exclusion. In K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. Van Regenmortel, A. Wanka (eds.), *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives* (239-243). Springer, International Perspectives on Aging.

Townsend, B. G., Chen, J. T. H., & Wuthrich, V. M. (2021). Barriers and facilitators to social participation in older adults: A systematic literature review. *Clinical Gerontologist*, *44*(4), 359–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/07317115.2020.1863890

Van der Greft, S. (2024). Social participation of low-income older adults in deprived urban neighborhoods in Amsterdam: A study among native Dutch, and Surinamese, Moroccan and Turkish migrants in The Netherlands. *Social participation in urban aging, 30*(8). https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2816

Van Dyk, S., Lessenich, S., Denninger, T., & Richter, A. (2013). The many meanings of "Active Ageing": Confronting public discourse with older people's stories. *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques* (online)*, 44*(1). https://doi.org/10.4000/rsa.932

Van Hees, S., Horstman, K., Jansen, M., & Ruwaard, D. (2015). Betekenissen van burgerschap van ouderen in de participatiesamenleving. *Tijdschrift voor Gezondheidswetenschappen, 93,* 191–196. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12508-015-0076-9

Vega-Tinoco, A., Gil-Lacruz, A.I. & Gil-Lacruz, M. (20220. Does civic participation promote active aging in Europe?. *Voluntas, 33,* 599–614. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00340-y

Vercauteren, T., Nyqvist, F., & Näsman, M. (2025). What characterises civic engagement in later life?: Micro-, meso- and macro-level influences**.** In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 20-39). Bristol University Press.

Wahl, H. W., Iwarsson, S., & Oswald, F. (2012). Aging well and the environment: Toward an integrative model and research agenda for the future. *The Gerontologist*, *52*(3), 306–316. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnr154

Wahl, H. W., & Gerstorf, D. (2020). Person-environment resources for aging well: Environmental docility and life space as conceptual pillars for future contextual gerontology. *The Gerontologist*, *60*(3), 368–375. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa006

Walsh, K., Scharf, T., & Keating, N. (2017). Social exclusion of older persons: A scoping review and conceptual framework. *European Journal of Aging*, *14*(81). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-016-0398-8

Walsh, K., Scharf, T., Van Regenmortel, S., & Wanka, A. *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives*. Springer, International Perspectives on Aging.

Walsh, K. (2024). Life course perspectives on place. In M.P. Cutchin and G.D. Rowles (eds.), *Handbook of Aging and Place* (pp. 61-81). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Ward, M.C., Milligan, C., Rose, E.E., Elliott, M. (2024). 'Being' and 'doing' well in the moment: Theoretical and relational contributions of health geography to living well with Dementia. *Area, 56*(4), e12899. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12899

World Bank Group. (2022). *Silver hues: Building age-friendly cities*. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/d4b84e5a-8d31-5b32-b8ad-3d23b7f0c61e

World Health Organization. (2002). *Active ageing: A policy framework*. http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/67215/1/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf

World Health Organization. (2020). *Decade of healthy ageing: Baseline report*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240017900

PART 2:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2:
Methodological approach

Chapter 2:
Methodological approach

In this chapter, I will expand on my research paradigm, and also the data collected and used in the different studies. I will end with a reflection on my researcher positionality.

1. Research paradigm

This PhD dissertation starts from what is often called in the literature an interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. This paradigm, at its core, posits that reality is socially constructed (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Moreover, it sees human reality as subjective and emphasizes the task of the researcher to interpret and understand what a participant experiences, with regard to the research question or topic, and how this experience relates to the broader context of their lives (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In doing so, the researcher makes use of a "subjective epistemology" to construct a meaningful narrative frame out of participants' stories, incorporating his, her or their own life experiences and worldview, while entering in dialogue with what the participants say about the context of their lives (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). In this dissertation, the life-course approach, through employing life-story interviews accompanied by life diagrams, fits in neatly with this interpretivist and/or constructionist paradigm.

This PhD dissertation is also inspired by the research paradigm of phenomenology, incorporating elements of phenomenological approaches in its research design. While phenomenology is ontologically akin to constructivism or interpretivism, as both paradigms see human reality as experiential and subjective, phenomenology's core objective is to approach human experience as an isolated phenomenon: it attempts to uncover what remains when you strip individual experience of the social, cultural or historical embeddedness of their lives (Tuck and McKensie, 2014), which separates it from constructivist or interpretivism. I do not imply that the chapters in this dissertation are per se phenomenological, but it is the attention to participants' "lived" (Creswell,

1994) experiences, which is at phenomenology's core, that has inspired the analysis and presentation of the results of the empirical chapters.

As such, during the empirical chapters, I aimed, as much as my research design allowed me, to strike a balance and do justice to participants' "lived" experiences of civic engagement, highlighting what they say about it and what the term might mean to them, while also grounding and interpreting it within the social, historical or cultural contexts of their lives.

2. Data collected and used in the studies

Here, I will explain the data used in the empirical studies and the methodological paper that follow this chapter (**Chapters 3-6**). Life-story interviews related to the civic engagement of participants were collected. Life diagrams served as a supporting graphic and participatory elicitation tool to foster reflexivity and promote storytelling (Dikmans and Chacur, 2024; Söderström, 2020). I collected data as part of the CIVEX-project ('Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Features, experiences and policy implications'), which is an interdisciplinary research project, spanning universities in four countries. In 2022 and 2023, 240 life-story interviews have been collected in Belgium, Finland, Spain and Sweden (n=60 per country) with older adults either living in residential care facilities, receiving formal home care, residing in disadvantaged urban areas, or having a non-European migration background (n=15 per group and per country). A more detailed description of the PhD research within this project together with the questionnaires and interview guide is found in **Appendix 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3** at the end of this chapter. While, in Belgium, 60 older adults were interviewed by multiple data collectors as part of the CIVEX-project, I conducted 9 additional interviews with older adults residing in disadvantaged urban areas in Brussels, to expand the participant pool, bringing the total interview count to 69 participants (of which 39 resided in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood and 30 had a migration history). The three empirical chapters all make use of this dataset, but selection criteria have been different following the focus and aims of the specific papers.

Chapter 3 makes use of life diagrams collected in Spain and Belgium. **Chapter 4** explores how participants talk about their civic engagement as bi-directional and shaped through neighborhood changes, making use of data collected in four different European countries (i.e., Belgium, Finland, Spain and Sweden). **Chapters 5** engages with the places older migrants find meaningful for their civic engagement, while in **Chapter 6**, composite vignettes represent collectively shared narratives, which are grounded in the life-story interviews, and which connect to the experiences of neighborhood change, social networks and informal help of long-term residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Both chapters make use of data collected in 2022-2023 in the district of Brussels, Belgium. Details are found below.

Chapter 3:

Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement:
The life diagram and its potential for aging and childhood research

Data collection and participants: Life diagrams and excerpts of the interviews were used for participants in the life-story interviews in Belgium and Spain. These participants were all 60 years or older. The interviews took place face to face.

Materials and analysis: In this chapter, we draw on data illustratively rather than conducting a systematic analysis. The examples coming from the data served to make a methodological point about the value of graphic elicitation tools, and more precisely the life diagrams.

Chapter 4:

Civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods:
An environmental perspective

Data collection and participants: The participant sample involves 60 participants living in disadvantaged urban areas and took place in Belgium (n=15), Finland (n=15), Spain

(n=15) and Sweden (n=15). Participants were at least 65 years old. Interviews were conducted face to face and in each country's national language(s) (i.e., Dutch or French in Belgium, Finnish or Swedish in Finland, Catalan or Spanish in Spain, and Swedish in Sweden). When it comes to sampling, both location-based convenience sampling techniques, through neighborhood organizations or other neighborhood places, and snowball sampling techniques were used for participant recruitment. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, adhering to ethical and GDPR guidelines.

Materials and analysis: For data collection, a semi-structured, three-part, life-story interview guide was used. The first part dealt with how participants attributed meaning to their civic engagement. The second part concerned the different dimensions of civic engagement, using a life-course approach. Here, life diagrams (Dikmans and Chacur, 2024; Söderström, 2020) were used as a graphic elicitation technique inspiring reflexivity and dialogue. The third part inquired about participants' experiences of in- and exclusion of civic engagement. Before the interview, a socio-demographic survey, and a civic engagement questionnaire developed by Theocharis and van Deth (2018), were used. Data analysis followed three steps, namely a pre-coding phase, data extraction by all authors and reflexive thematic analysis by the first author (i.e., me) (Braun and Clarke, 2024).

Chapter 5:

A plurality of place:

Towards a more inclusive understanding of older migrants' civic engagement

Data collection and participants: The participant sample includes eight participants who were older adults (>60 years) living in Belgium and who had migrated from a non-European country in adulthood. Interviews took place face to face and were conducted in Dutch, English, or French. Both location-based convenience sampling techniques, through neighborhood organizations or other public places in the neighborhood, and snowball sampling techniques were used. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and adhered to the ethical and GDPR guidelines.

Materials and analysis: The text box concerning **Chapter 4** describes the data collection process that has been followed for this study as well. Data analysis took place through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2024).

Chapter 6:
"Life Course of Place":
Older Adults' Social Networks and Informal Help Amidst Urban Change

Data collection and participants: The participant sample comprises a total number of 19 participants who lived in one of two disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Brussels, Belgium, namely the *Brabantwijk* and *Kuregem*. These participants were long-term residents (>20 years) of these neighborhoods. Participants were at least 60 years old. The interviews took place face to face. Interviews were conducted in Dutch, English or French. In terms of sampling, both location-based convenience sampling techniques through neighborhood organizations or other relevant social places in the neighborhood and snowball sampling techniques were used. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and adhered to the ethical and GDPR guidelines.

Materials and analysis: The text box concerning **Chapter 4** describes the data collection process that has been followed for this study. The analytical focus for this study was on one dimension of civic engagement, namely informal help. Data analysis occurred through the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL), which consists of a narrative preparation and a thematic analysis of the data (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; 2021). Results are presented through composite vignettes, in the style of Claeys et al. (2025) and Knight et al. (2021).

---

3. Positionality statement

One's positionality as a researcher has a major influence on the research process, including the way data is collected and analyzed (Bourke, 2014). As such, the factors that drive and motivate a researcher to study a certain topic are related to his, her or their individual, social and relational contexts, and it is essential to describe and reflect on these relations (Laura, 2013). If this is not done carefully, the researcher risks overlooking the subtle and often unseen way that his, her or their individual bias shapes the research. This is particularly relevant in research that is embedded in a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm that highlights subjectivity and individual experiences (see **Section 1** of this chapter). Here, I aim to provide some transparency and reflection regarding how my personal bias in relation to my researcher role might have influenced the research trajectory, based on a brief description of my 1) background, 2) fieldwork stance, and 3) reflexive safeguards.

3.1. Background

It is important to describe my academic and professional background. I started my PhD with an academic background in cultural anthropology, studying younger persons for my Master's thesis. Similarly, during my professional career, I had more experience working with younger persons than with older adults. The skills, experiences and knowledge I obtained through working with this age group needed to be refashioned in the context of later life. I realized there were differences, but also commonalities between these two age groups, as both younger persons and older adults are in their own way excluded categories that do not fit neatly in a society organized around mid-life or adulthood that emphasizes work (Wanka & Walther, 2024).

Moreover, I was not born or raised in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood, nor do I have a non-European migration background, and this has undeniably shaped my experience while doing fieldwork. I did my best to accrue an insider's perspective as much as I could, through being present in the neighborhoods and using an ethnographic approach before conducting life-story interviews, such as doing participant observation

and engaging in small talk with residents (Spradley, 1980). I walked around extensively to get a spatial sense of the neighborhoods I aimed to study. This was not always easy, as the demands of the CIVEX-project regarding data collection in the first year were ambitious, and the requirement was that I did at least 60 interviews with four different groups of potentially excluded older adults. This left me with little time to orient and embed myself, or get to know persons and build the trust and bonds necessary to be truly able to grasp participants' life worlds.

3.2. Fieldwork stance

I feel strongly that my role as a PhD researcher within the wider context of the CIVEX-project has pushed me towards taking on a more classical research role, namely that of a data collector (Tenny et al., 2022). In my first year, I spent a lot of time contacting neighborhood associations, recruiting participants, and conducting the life-story interviews. This is not a bad thing per se: this extensive year of data collection and the resulting collection of 69 in-depth qualitative life-story interviews (of which 42 were conducted by me) concerning older adults' civic engagement will undeniably help to push empirical knowledge on civic engagement in later life forward. It enabled me (and might possibly enable future researchers) to explore previously unrecognized themes and fields of inquiry.

What got underexposed, however, where other possible researcher roles that I could have taken up, which are more action oriented. Examples are the researcher as a playful actor influencing data collection together with others (Collins and Stockton, 2022), or as a community actor who envisions social change (Smolarek et al., 2021). Yet, within the confines of this dissertations' more traditional top-down research design, I did my best to include participants' voices during data collection, analysis and the writing of the papers. I did this through varied means, from organizing feedback sessions to making use of participatory data collection tools (i.e., the life diagrams described in **Chapter 3**) or using analytical approaches that highlight participants' narratives (i.e., the composite vignettes in **Chapter 6**).

3.3. Reflexive safeguards

Life stories are long and exhaustive exercises that can be demanding for participants. Studies underscore the importance of providing enough pauses during interviews (Akram, 2021) or using participatory of visual elicitation tools to foster participants' own engagement (Russell, 2022). I took both recommendations to heart when conducting the interviews. During the participant recruitment and data collection, I reflected as much as possible on the fact that I was working with a research population that was diverse (e.g., older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, older adults with a migration background). As such, I was aware that I had to be attentive to their needs, desires and experiences regarding data collection, and I carefully considered strategies to not overburden them or disrupt their daily live routines.

Self-reflection on assumed preferences and needs of the persons who you as a researcher want to reach is absolutely necessary for ethically sound research (Logie, 2021). Therefore, I created moments where participants could, as much as possible, co-decide the context and process of the data collection, through letting them for instance decide the hour and venue of the interview, when or where to provide breaks, and also through discussing with them what the priorities of the interview should be. As such, participants decided which dimensions of civic engagement were most important in the context of their lives, and we treated those dimensions first during their interviews.

In short, the research design, my own personal biases, and my interaction with the participants whose experiences are central in the following chapters, have undoubtedly shaped the direction of this dissertation. Where I could, I did my best to position myself more fully in the research context**,** recognizing and, whenever possible, incorporating the realities and experiences of the participants. These brief methodological considerations can be considered as constituting a dialogue with the methodological and ethical reflections detailed in the discussion (**Chapter 8**) of this work.

References

Akram, O. (2021). Getting extreme poverty narrated: Methodological challenges of interviewing older persons. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211016716

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S.K. (1992). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. Allyn and Bacon. Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: Reflecting on the research process. *The Qualitative Report, 19*(33): 1-9. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1026

Braun V., & Clarke V. (2024). Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: A review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). *Palliative Medicine, 38*(6), 608-616. https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163241234800

Claeys, A., Chaouni, S. B., Tricas-Sauras, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Bridging the gaps: Narratives of informal carers of older migrants with dementia on professional care. *Ageing & Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X25000017

Collins, C.S., & Stockton, C. (2022). The theater of qualitative research: The role of the researcher/actor. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221103109

Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Dierckx de Casterlé, B., De Vliegher, K., Gastmans, C., & Mertens, E. (2021). Complex qualitative data analysis: Lessons learned from the experiences with the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven. *Qualitative Health Research, 31*(6), 1083–1093. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320966981

Dierckx de Casterlé, B., Gastmans, C., Bryon, E., & Denier, Y. (2012). QUAGOL: A guide for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 49*(3), 360–371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2011.09.012

Dikmans, B., & Chacur, K. (2024). Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for ageing and childhood research. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking ages: A*

dialogue between ageing and childhood research (pp. 49–65). Routledge.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Kivunja, C. & Kuyini, A.B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education, 6*(5), 26-41.

Knight, R. L., Mackintosh, K. A., Hudson, J., Shelley, J., Saynor, Z. L., & McNarry, M. A. (2023). Battling the unknown: Using composite vignettes to portray lived experiences of Covid-19 and long-Covid. *PLoS ONE, 18*(4), Article e0284710. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284710

Laura, C. T. (2013). Intimate inquiry: Love as "data" in qualitative research. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies, 13*(4), 289–292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613487875

Logie, C. (2021). *Working with excluded populations in HIV: Hard to reach or out of sight?*. Springer Nature.

Russell, L. D. (2022). Life story interviewing as a method to co-construct narratives about resilience. *The Qualitative Report, 27*(2), 348-365. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5183

Smolarek, B. B., Wolfgram, M., Vang, M. N., Xiong, C. P., Lee, L., Lee, P., Thao, M., Vang, K., Xiong, P.K., Xiong, O., & Xiong, P. (2021). Our HMoob American College *Paj Ntaub*: student-engaged Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) as counter-invisibility work. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *36*(6), 1018–1038. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1888162

Söderström, J. (2020). Life diagrams: a methodological and analytical tool for accessing life histories. *Qualitative Research, 20*(1), 3-21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118819068

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G. D. (2022, September 18). *Qualitative study*. StatPearls - NCBI Bookshelf. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/

Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J.W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political Science Review, 10*(1), 139-163. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230

Tuck, E., & McKenzie, M. (2014). Methodologies of critical place inquiry. In E. Tuck, & M. Mckensie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods* (pp. 75-96). Routledge.

Wanka, A., & Walther, A. (2024). In and out of the labour market: A Linking Ages perspective on labour market transitions in early and late adulthood. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking ages: A dialogue between ageing and childhood research* (pp. 190-203). Routledge.

Appendix 2.1: Description of CIVEX in relation to the PhD

The CIVEX-project was a 4-country (VUB [Belgium], Abo Akademi [Finland], Universitat de Barcelona [Spain], Uppsala Universitet [Sweden]) cooperation, investigating social exclusion from civic engagement in later life. It lasted from 2021 until 2024. The project had both a quantitative part, which examined the influence of micro-, meso-, and macro-level variables on civic engagement in later life, and a qualitative part, of which this dissertation is a result, exploring life course obstacles and enablers in relation to civic engagement in later life. More specifically, this qualitative part zoomed in on four under-represented groups of older adults, identified through an a priori literature review. These were 1) oder people living in long-term care settings, 2) older people living at home who receive social and/or health care via formal services, 3) older people living in socially disadvantaged urban areas, and 4) older people with a non-European background who have migrated in adulthood. Furthermore, the project defined civic engagement as multidimensional, as explained in this dissertation (i.e., formal volunteering, institutionalized and non-institutionalized political participation, informal help, associational membership and digital civic engagement). In total, 240 interviews were conducted in the four countries (60 per country, n=15 for each group). Interviews existed of three parts. An introductory part, where meanings around civic engagement and first experiences were discussed, a second part in which the five dimensions of civic engagement were explored from a life course perspective (with the aid of life diagrams) and a third part in which participants were asked about experiences of in- and exclusion from civic engagement. At the start of the interviews, participants were asked to provide information during a socio-demographic profile survey and a citizen engagement questionnaire. At the end, more information was asked as part of the socio-demographic survey. The interviews were inductively coded in a datafile directly after the interviews and when all interviews were done, a second coding round was conducted, resulting in an Excel sheet comprising 264 rows and 344 columns. In this sheet, preliminary themes could be found that enabled further exploration and/or analysis for the themes that I as a doctoral researcher was interested in. This Excel sheet formed the basis for the different empirical chapters and enabled me to see in how many interviews topics that were for instance related to the neighborhood environment, living in a disadvantaged urban area, neighborhood organizations, or social networks, appeared across interviews, across groups and across different dimensions of civic engagement. To ensure full transparency, the interview guide is added in the next page (**Appendix 2.2**), as well as the socio-demographic profile and the citizen engagement questionnaire (**Appendix 2.3**).

Appendix 2.2: Interview guide

Groups considered			
Older people living in long-term care institutions	**Older people living at home who receive substantial social and/or health care via formal services**	**Older people living in socially disadvantaged areas**	**Older people with diverse migrant and ethno-cultural backgrounds**
Questions	*Questions*	*Questions*	*Questions*
As you know, we are interested in your experiences of civic engagement. People engage in civic activities in different ways, for example, by volunteering, joining or being a member of a political party or trade union or voting in elections. Let me begin by asking you a couple of questions: Do you engage in such civic activities now? Can you share with me in which kinds of civic activities you engage on now? What does civic engagement mean for you? Let me now ask you about the frequency in which you engage in a couple of activities related to civic participation (*go to socio-demographic profile and use the Participatory Behavioural Scale)*	As you know, we are interested in your experiences of civic engagement. People engage in civic activities in different ways, for example, by volunteering, joining or being a member of a political party or trade union or voting in elections. Let me begin by asking you a couple of questions: Do you engage in such civic activities now? Can you share with me in which kinds of civic activities you engage on now? What does civic engagement mean for you? Let me now ask you about the frequency in which you engage in a couple of activities related to civic participation *(go to socio-demographic profile and use the Participatory Behavioural Scale)*	As you know, we are interested in your experiences of civic engagement. People engage in civic activities in different ways, for example, by volunteering, joining or being a member of a political party or trade union or voting in elections. Let me begin by asking you a couple of questions: Do you engage in such civic activities now? Can you share with me in which kinds of civic activities you engage on now? What does civic engagement mean for you? Let me now ask you about the frequency in which you engage in a couple of activities related to civic participation *(go to socio-demographic profile and use the Participatory Behavioural Scale)*	As you know, we are interested in your experiences of civic engagement. People engage in civic activities in different ways, for example, by volunteering, joining or being a member of a political party or trade union or voting in elections. Let me begin by asking you a couple of questions: Do you engage in such civic activities now? Can you share with me in which kinds of civic activities you engage on now? What does civic engagement mean for you? Let me now ask you about the frequency in which you engage in a couple of activities related to civic participation *(go to socio-demographic profile and use the Participatory Behavioural Scale)*

Could you remember the first time in your life you engage civically? Please, would you share with me some details about this first experience?	Could you remember the first time in your life you engage civically? Please, would you share with me some details about this first experience?	Could you remember the first time in your life you engage civically? Please, would you share with me some details about this first experience?	Could you remember the first time in your life you engage civically? Please, would you share with me some details about this first experience?
I would like to ask you to reflect on your involvement in different types of civic activities through your life. **LIFE DIAGRAM 1** **Informal help provided** We are going to use this diagram to help us visualize your involvement at different points in your life *(show the 1^{st} PPT to the informant)*. The idea is to draw a line for each type of civic activity you engage on and give us an indication of the level of participation at different moments of your life. Thus, by using either long or short lines you can tell us how your involvement in an activity has been at any given point in time. This will allow us to understand when in your life you have been more, or less, involved in these	I would like to ask you to reflect on your involvement in different types of civic activities through your life. **LIFE DIAGRAM 1** **Informal help provided** We are going to use this diagram to help us visualize your involvement at different points in your life *(show the 1^{st} PPT to the informant)*. The idea is to draw a line for each type of civic activity you engage on and give us an indication of the level of participation at different moments of your life. Thus, by using either long or short lines you can tell us how your involvement in an activity has been at any given point in time. This will allow us to understand when in your life you have been more, or less, involved in these	I would like to ask you to reflect on your involvement in different types of civic activities through your life. **LIFE DIAGRAM 1** **Informal help provided** We are going to use this diagram to help us visualize your involvement at different points in your life *(show the 1^{st} PPT to the informant)*. The idea is to draw a line for each type of civic activity you engage on and give us an indication of the level of participation at different moments of your life. Thus, by using either long or short lines you can tell us how your involvement in an activity has been at any given point in time. This will allow us to understand when in your life you have been more, or less, involved in these	I would like to ask you to reflect on your involvement in different types of civic activities through your life. **LIFE DIAGRAM 1** **Informal help provided** We are going to use this diagram to help us visualize your involvement at different points in your life *(show the 1^{st} PPT to the informant)*. The idea is to draw a line for each type of civic activity you engage on and give us an indication of the level of participation at different moments of your life. Thus, by using either long or short lines you can tell us how your involvement in an activity has been at any given point in time. This will allow us to understand when in your life you have been more, or less, involved in these

activities. Let us begin with the informal help you have provided throughout your life, which research regards as a type of civic activity. Let us discuss the help and support, if any, you **provide** to other people, both in your family or outside your family. Can you tell me about this? Do you **provide** help and support to others **now**? *(If the informant needs help to think of things they provide help with, here are a couple of examples: By help and support, I mean things that you provide help with like household chores, errands, transportation, paperwork, or any other practical issues. It could be that you are there for other people when they need somebody who listens or when they are upset, or they do not know what to do).* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you provide help or support to other	activities. Let us begin with the informal help you have provided throughout your life, which research regards as a type of civic activity. Let us discuss the help and support, if any, you **provide** to other people, both in your family or outside your family. Can you tell me about this? Do you **provide** help and support to others **now**? *(If the informant needs help to think of things they provide help with, here are a couple of examples: By help and support, I mean things that you provide help with like household chores, errands, transportation, paperwork, or any other practical issues. It could be that you are there for other people when they need somebody who listens or when they are upset, or they do not know what to do).* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you provide help or support to other	activities. Let us begin with the informal help you have provided throughout your life, which research regards as a type of civic activity. Let us discuss the help and support, if any, you **provide** to other people, both in your family or outside your family. Can you tell me about this? Do you **provide** help and support to others **now**? *(If the informant needs help to think of things they provide help with, here are a couple of examples: By help and support, I mean things that you provide help with like household chores, errands, transportation, paperwork, or any other practical issues. It could be that you are there for other people when they need somebody who listens or when they are upset, or they do not know what to do).* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you provide help or support to other	activities. Let us begin with the informal help you have provided throughout your life, which research regards as a type of civic activity. Let us discuss the help and support, if any, you **provide** to other people, both in your family or outside your family. Can you tell me about this? Do you **provide** help and support to others **now**? *(If the informant needs help to think of things they provide help with, here are a couple of examples: By help and support, I mean things that you provide help with like household chores, errands, transportation, paperwork, or any other practical issues. It could be that you are there for other people when they need somebody who listens or when they are upset, or they do not know what to do).* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you provide help or support to other

people at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your provision of help and support to others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)? **Informal help received** Can you tell me first about the help and support, if any, you are **receiving** from other people **now**, both in your family or outside your family? *(Remember, it is OK to use some of the areas mentioned earlier to help the informant along if necessary)* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you receive help or support from other people at **different moments of your life**?	people at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your provision of help and support to others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)? **Informal help received** Can you tell me first about the help and support, if any, you are **receiving** from other people **now**, both in your family or outside your family? *(Remember, it is OK to use some of the areas mentioned earlier to help the informant along if necessary)* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you receive help or support from other people at **different moments of your life**?	people at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your provision of help and support to others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)? **Informal help received** Can you tell me first about the help and support, if any, you are **receiving** from other people **now**, both in your family or outside your family? *(Remember, it is OK to use some of the areas mentioned earlier to help the informant along if necessary)* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you receive help or support from other people at **different moments of your life**?	people at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your provision of help and support to others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)? **Informal help received** Can you tell me first about the help and support, if any, you are **receiving** from other people **now**, both in your family or outside your family? *(Remember, it is OK to use some of the areas mentioned earlier to help the informant along if necessary)* Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early on in life up until today? In what ways did you receive help or support from other people at **different moments of your life**?

I see that in this point in your life the help and support you receive from others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?	I see that in this point in your life the help and support you receive from others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?	I see that in this point in your life the help and support you receive from others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?	I see that in this point in your life the help and support you receive from others changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?
LIFE DIAGRAM 2 **Associational memberships** Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about your involvement in associations. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of participation at different moments of your life when thinking of involvement in associations. The same applies now, use long lines to indicate when your participation in associations has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in associations has been low.	**LIFE DIAGRAM 2** **Associational memberships** Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about your involvement in associations. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of participation at different moments of your life when thinking of involvement in associations. The same applies now, use long lines to indicate when your participation in associations has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in associations has been low.	**LIFE DIAGRAM 2** **Associational memberships** Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about your involvement in associations. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of participation at different moments of your life when thinking of involvement in associations. The same applies now, use long lines to indicate when your participation in associations has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in associations has been low.	**LIFE DIAGRAM 2** **Associational memberships** Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about your involvement in associations. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of participation at different moments of your life when thinking of involvement in associations. The same applies now, use long lines to indicate when your participation in associations has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in associations has been low.

Do you **currently participate** in the activities that the organizations you are a member of offer? It could be activities offered at a sport club, a social club, a religious organisation (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), or any other type of organisation in your community? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What groups or organisations have you belonged to **at different moment of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in groups or organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?	Do you **currently participate** in the activities that the organizations you are a member of offer? It could be activities offered at a sport club, a social club, a religious organisation (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), or any other type of organisation in your community? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What groups or organisations have you belonged to **at different moment of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in groups or organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?	Do you **currently participate** in the activities that the organizations you are a member of offer? It could be activities offered at a sport club, a social club, a religious organisation (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), or any other type of organisation in your community? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What groups or organisations have you belonged to **at different moment of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in groups or organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?	Do you **currently participate** in the activities that the organizations you are a member of offer? It could be activities offered at a sport club, a social club, a religious organisation (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), or any other type of organisation in your community? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What groups or organisations have you belonged to **at different moment of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in groups or organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this change? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected this (negatively / positively)?
LIFE DIAGRAM 3 **Volunteering**	**LIFE DIAGRAM 3** **Volunteering**	**LIFE DIAGRAM 3** **Volunteering**	**LIFE DIAGRAM 3** **Volunteering**

Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about volunteering. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of volunteering activities you have engaged in at different moments of your life. Please use long lines to indicate when your volunteering activities have been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in volunteering has been low. Do you **currently participate** in volunteering, charity work, or any other unpaid activities? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from when you were a child up until today? What volunteer, charity, or unpaid activities have you carried out **at different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your engagement in volunteering changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that	Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about volunteering. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of volunteering activities you have engaged in at different moments of your life. Please use long lines to indicate when your volunteering activities have been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in volunteering has been low. Do you **currently participate** in volunteering, charity work, or any other unpaid activities? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from when you were a child up until today? What volunteer, charity, or unpaid activities have you carried out **at different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your engagement in volunteering changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that	Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about volunteering. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of volunteering activities you have engaged in at different moments of your life. Please use long lines to indicate when your volunteering activities have been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in volunteering has been low. Do you **currently participate** in volunteering, charity work, or any other unpaid activities? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from when you were a child up until today? What volunteer, charity, or unpaid activities have you carried out **at different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your engagement in volunteering changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that	Let us now use another life diagram. This one will be about volunteering. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of volunteering activities you have engaged in at different moments of your life. Please use long lines to indicate when your volunteering activities have been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when your involvement in volunteering has been low. Do you **currently participate** in volunteering, charity work, or any other unpaid activities? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from when you were a child up until today? What volunteer, charity, or unpaid activities have you carried out **at different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your engagement in volunteering changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that

affected your volunteering activities (negatively / positively)?	affected your volunteering activities (negatively / positively)?	affected your volunteering activities (negatively / positively)?	affected your volunteering activities (negatively / positively)?
LIFE DIAGRAM 4 Let us now use the last life diagram we will use today. This one will be about voting and participation in political organizations so we will need different lines. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of these activities at different moments of your life using long lines to indicate when your participation in political organizations and voting has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when it has been low. **Voting** Let us start by voting. Can you remember when you **first voted** in an election? When did you **last vote** in an election? How, if at all, has your participation in elections **changed over the courses of your life**?	**LIFE DIAGRAM 4** Let us now use the last life diagram we will use today. This one will be about voting and participation in political organizations so we will need to use different lines. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of these activities at different moments of your life using long lines to indicate when your participation in political organizations and voting has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when it has been low. **Voting** Let us start by voting. Can you remember when you **first voted** in an election? When did you **last vote** in an election? How, if at all, has your participation in elections **changed over the courses of your life**?	**LIFE DIAGRAM 4** Let us now use the last life diagram we will use today. This one will be about voting and participation in political organizations so we will need to use different lines. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of these activities at different moments of your life using long lines to indicate when your participation in political organizations and voting has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when it has been low. **Voting** Let us start by voting. Can you remember when you **first voted** in an election? When did you **last vote** in an election? How, if at all, has your participation in elections **changed over the courses of your life**?	**LIFE DIAGRAM 4** Let us now use the last life diagram we will use today. This one will be about voting and participation in political organizations so we will need to use different lines. We would appreciate it if you could draw a line to indicate the level of these activities at different moments of your life using long lines to indicate when your participation in political organizations and voting has been high throughout your life, and short lines to help us visualize when it has been low. **Voting** Let us start by voting. Can you remember when you **first voted** in an election? When did you **last vote** in an election? How, if at all, has your participation in elections **changed over the courses of your life**?

I see that in this point in your life your voting activities changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected your voting activities (negatively / positively)?	I see that in this point in your life your voting activities changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected your voting activities (negatively / positively)?	I see that in this point in your life your voting activities changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected your voting activities (negatively / positively)?	I see that in this point in your life your voting activities changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life that affected your voting activities (negatively / positively)?
Participation in political organisations	**Participation in political organisations**	**Participation in political organisations**	**Participation in political organisations**
How about your participation in political organisations of any kind? Do you **currently participate in the activities that** political organisations, trade unions, or any other type of political organisations arrange?	How about your participation in political organisations of any kind? Do you **currently participate in the activities that** political organisations, trade unions, or any other type of political organisations arrange?	How about your participation in political organisations of any kind? Do you **currently participate in the activities that** political organisations, trade unions, or any other type of political organisations arrange?	How about your participation in political organisations of any kind? Do you **currently participate in the activities that** political organisations, trade unions, or any other type of political organisations arrange?
Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What political organisations have you belonged to **at different times of your life**?	Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What political organisations have you belonged to **at different times of your life**?	Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What political organisations have you belonged to **at different times of your life**?	Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? What political organisations have you belonged to **at different times of your life**?
I see that in this point in your life your participation in political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life	I see that in this point in your life your participation in political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life	I see that in this point in your life your participation in political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life	I see that in this point in your life your participation in political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life

that affected your participation in political organisations (negatively / positively)? **Non-institutionalised forms of political participation** How about your involvement in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations, such as participating in protest activities or social movements of any kind? Can you tell me about your participation in this type of activities **now**? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? In what ways did you participate in this type of activities at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life	that affected your participation in political organisations (negatively / positively)? **Non-institutionalised forms of political participation** How about your involvement in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations, such as participating in protest activities or social movements of any kind? Can you tell me about your participation in this type of activities **now**? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? In what ways did you participate in this type of activities at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life	that affected your participation in political organisations (negatively / positively)? **Non-institutionalised forms of political participation** How about your involvement in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations, such as participating in protest activities or social movements of any kind? Can you tell me about your participation in this type of activities **now**? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? In what ways did you participate in this type of activities at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life	that affected your participation in political organisations (negatively / positively)? **Non-institutionalised forms of political participation** How about your involvement in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations, such as participating in protest activities or social movements of any kind? Can you tell me about your participation in this type of activities **now**? Can you tell me how **this has changed** from early in life up until today? In what ways did you participate in this type of activities at **different moments of your life**? I see that in this point in your life your participation in activities aimed at influencing political decisions outside political organisations changed (or decreased or increased). Can you share with me what were the reasons for this? Were there any events or transitions in your life

that affected this (negatively / positively)?	that affected this (negatively / positively)?	that affected this (negatively / positively)?	that affected this (negatively / positively)?
Could you tell me about the ways in which **moving here** has affected both in positive and/or negative ways, your life? How was your life before moving to this place? What things have changed in your life since you have moved here?	Could you tell me about the ways in which **receiving social / health care** has affected both in positive and/or negative ways, your life? How was your life before you start to receive social / health care? What things have changed in your life since you have started to receive care?	Could you tell me about the ways in which **living in this neighbourhood** has affected both in positive and/or negative ways, your life? How was your life before moving to this neighbourhood? What things have changed in your life since you have moved here? *(Ask only if the person have not always lived in the same neighbourhood)*	Could you tell me about the ways in which **migrating to this country** has affected, both in positive and/or negative ways, your life? How was your life before migrating? What things have changed in your life since you migrated to this country?
Could you tell me about the ways in which moving here has specifically affected, in both positive and/or negative ways, your views and experiences of civic engagement?	Could you tell me about the ways in which receiving social / health care has specifically affected, in both positive and/or negative ways, your views and experiences of civic engagement?	Could you tell me about the ways in which living in this neighbourhood has specifically affected, in both positive and/or negative ways, your views and experiences of civic engagement? *(Ask only if the person have not always lived in the same neighbourhood)*	Could you tell me about the ways in which migrating has specifically affected, in both positive and/or negative ways, your views and experiences of civic engagement?
Now I would like to talk about any **points in your life** when you felt left out from civic engagement.	Now I would like to talk about any **points in your life** when you felt left out from civic engagement.	Now I would like to talk about any **points in your life** when you felt left out from civic engagement.	Now I would like to talk about any **points in your life** when you felt left out from civic engagement.

What were the main reasons for you to feel left out in the moments you described previously?	What were the main reasons for you to feel left out in the moments you described previously?	What were the main reasons for you to feel left out in the moments you described previously?	What were the main reasons for you to feel left out in the moments you described previously?
Could you please describe one of these experiences of exclusion in more detail? Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.	Could you please describe one of these experiences of exclusion in more detail? Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.	Could you please describe one of these experiences of exclusion in more detail? Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.	Could you please describe one of these experiences of exclusion in more detail? Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.
Now I would like to ask you to look back at your life and tell me about the moments when you felt civically included. What were the main reasons for you to feel civically included in the moments you described previously?	Now I would like to ask you to look back at your life and tell me about the moments when you felt civically included. What were the main reasons for you to feel civically included in the moments you described previously?	Now I would like to ask you to look back at your life and tell me about the moments when you felt civically included. What were the main reasons for you to feel civically included in the moments you described previously?	Now I would like to ask you to look back at your life and tell me about the moments when you felt civically included. What were the main reasons for you to feel civically included in the moments you described previously?
Could you please describe one of these experiences of inclusion in more detail?	Could you please describe one of these experiences of inclusion in more detail?	Could you please describe one of these experiences of inclusion in more detail?	Could you please describe one of these experiences of inclusion in more detail?

Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.	Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.	Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.	Please, try to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, how you acted, what you thought and felt at the time, and why this episode is important or meaningful to you. You can use this card (*handle card with questions*) to help you remember the questions to answer.
Now I would like to ask you if there is anything that prevents or facilitates your participation in civic activities. If so, what? In which ways does your age prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does your gender prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does living here prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities?	Now I would like to ask you if there is anything that prevents or facilitates your participation in civic activities? If so, what? In which ways does your age prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does your gender prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does receiving social / health care at home prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities?	Now I would like to ask you if there is anything that prevents or facilitates your participation in civic activities? If so, what? In which ways does your age prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does your gender prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does living in this neighbourhood prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities?	Now I would like to ask you if there is anything that prevents or facilitates your participation in civic activities? If so, what? In which ways does your age prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does your gender prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities? In which ways does having a migrant status prevent or facilitate your participation in civic activities?
We have talked about barriers and facilitators to civic engagement you have faced or are currently facing. Now thinking about the	We have talked about barriers and facilitators to civic engagement you have faced or are currently facing. Now thinking about the	We have talked about barriers and facilitators to civic engagement you have faced or are currently facing. Now thinking about the	We have talked about barriers and facilitators to civic engagement you have faced or are currently facing. Now thinking about the

future, is there anything you would like to change about your engagement in civic activities.	future, is there anything you would like to change about your engagement in civic activities.	future, is there anything you would like to change about your engagement in civic activities.	future, is there anything you would like to change about your engagement in civic activities.

Appendix 2.3: Sociodemographic profile and citizen engagement questionnaire

When setting up interviews we would like all teams to ask the following questions from potential informants so that every team remains cognizant of how each of the four groups that CIVEX focuses on get samples with an array of backgrounds.

1. Can I ask how old (or young) you are? _____ (in years)

2. How about your gender, do you identify as:
- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)

3. Were you born in (COUNTRY of interview)?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

IF the answer is NO, pose the specific questions for older people with diverse migrant and ethno-cultural backgrounds to determine which group to 'assign' the potential informant to

4. Where were you born? _____
5. Can I ask you, when did you arrive in this country? _____ (year)
6. Do you consider yourself to be an ethnic and/or racial minority?

The next portion of this profile is to be used during the interviews (the information jotted below for a participant should match what has been jotted for that participant in the life diagrams)

Participant ID: _____
Interviewer: _____
Date of interview: _____
Length of interview: _____

Questions of citizen participation (Theocharis & van Deth, 2016)

		yes	no
1	Did you vote in the last national election?	o	o

	During the last twelve months, have you done any of the following:	yes	no
2	Helped someone living in your household	o	o
3	Helped a family member from outside the household, a friend or neighbour	o	o
4	Being a member of any association (sport or social club, religious organisation, etc.)	o	o
5	Participated in the activities of any association (sport or social club, religious organisation, etc.)	o	o
6	Worked for a party or candidate	o	o
7	Contacted a politician or a state or government official about an issue or problem	o	o
8	Attended a meeting of a political party or other political organization	o	o
9	Donated money to a political party or other political organization	o	o
10	Worked for a political action group	o	o
11	Signed a petition	o	o
12	Joined a demonstration	o	o
13	Donated money to a social, humanitarian or charitable organization	o	o
14	Volunteered in a social, humanitarian or charitable organization	o	o
15	Boycotted certain products for political or ethical reasons	o	o
16	Deliberately bought certain products for political or ethical reasons	o	o
17	Volunteered for a community project	o	o
18	Posted or shared links on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc) to political stories or articles for others to read	o	o
19	Commented on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc) on political or social issues	o	o
20	Encouraged other people to take action on a political or social issue using Facebook, Twitter or other social media platforms	o	o

		yes	no
21	During the last twelve months, have you been engaged in any other action not listed above to express your political or social views or concerns?	o	o
22	If yes, what did you do? (i) …… (ii) …… (iii) ……		

AFTER finishing the interview, please complete this informant profile by asking the questions deemed specific to the group the informant 'belongs':

Specific profile questions depending on group

Older people living in long-term care settings/ housing

1. In which year did you come to live here? _____

Older people living at home who substantial social and/or health care via formal services

1. In which year did you start receiving social and/or health care at home? _____

Older people living in socially disadvantaged areas

1. How long have you lived in this neighbourhood? _____

Older people with diverse migrant and ethno-cultural backgrounds

1. Are you a citizen of (COUNTRY of interview)? _____

2. Do you remember when you became a citizen here (year)? _____

3. Do you have other citizenships? In which countries?
_____

CONTINUE with the following questions, which should be posed to ALL informants irrespective of group:

7. What is your marital status?
- ☐ Married and living together with spouse, (year of marriage_____)(1)
- ☐ Registered partnership, (year of registering partnership_____) (2)
- ☐ Married, living separated from spouse, (year of start of separate living_____)(3)
- ☐ Never married (4)
- ☐ Divorced, (year of divorce_____) (5)
- ☐ Widowed, (year of death of the spouse_____) (6)

If the person is married but their partner does not live in their household for any reason (e.g. people living in nursing homes) then code 3.

8. Who is living with you in your household (multiple answers possible):
- ☐ Live alone (1)

- Partner or spouse (2)
- Children (3)
- Others-_____ (4)

9. What is the highest school leaving certificate or school degree that you have obtained?
_____

- Early childhood education ('less than primary' for educational attainment) (0)
- Primary education (1)
- Lower secondary education (2)
- Upper secondary education (3)
- Post-secondary non-tertiary education (4)
- Short-cycle tertiary education (5)
- Bachelor's or equivalent level (6)
- Master's or equivalent level (7)
- Doctoral or equivalent level (8)
- Other type (also abroad) (9)

10. What would you consider to have been/to be your primary occupation? Please give the exact name or title_____

Code into:

1. Managers
2. Professional
3. Technicians and associate professionals
4. Clerical support workers
5. Service and sales workers
6. Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers
7. Craft and related trades workers
8. Plant and machine operators, and assemblers
9. Elementary occupations
10. Armed forces occupations

11. How would you describe the area where your main residence is located?

- A big city (1)
- The suburbs or outskirts of a big city (2)
- A large town (3)
- A small town (4)
- A rural area or village (5)
- A remote rural area (6)
- Other (7)

12. Thinking of your household's total monthly income, would you say that your household is able to make ends meet...?

- With great difficulty (1)
- With some difficulty (2)
- Fairly easily (3)

- Easily (4)
- Prefer not to say (99)

13. In general, would you say your health now is…

- Excellent (1)
- Very good (2)
- Good (3)
- Fair (4)
- Poor (5)

14. Are you limited in your ability to carry out normal everyday activities, because of a physical or mental health problem or a disability?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Does not know (3)
- Prefer not to say (99)

Chapter 3:
Rethinking Life Stories in the Context of Civic Engagement:
The Life Diagram and Its Potential for Aging and Childhood Research

Published in:

Dikmans, B., & Chacur, K. (2024). Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for ageing and childhood research. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking Ages: A Dialogue between Childhood and Ageing Research*. London: Routledge Advances in Sociology (pp. 49-65).

Chapter 3:

Rethinking Life Stories in the Context of Civic Engagement: The Life Diagram and Its Potential for Aging and Childhood Research

Abstract

This chapter explores the application of the life diagram, a visual tool for eliciting insights and reflections on the life course, within the context of research on the civic engagement of older persons. Employing the life diagram in studies related to aging and childhood is subjected to critical examination. This analysis is underpinned by a dataset comprising 96 semi-structured interviews conducted with older persons in Spain and Belgium in 2022 and 2023, where life diagrams served as a supporting methodological tool. Three central arguments are advanced: (1) life diagrams emphasize the life course as a subjective process that is recreated through storytelling, (2) life diagrams enable us to rethink the past, by exploring childhood, (young) adulthood and future through reflective exercises and (3) life diagrams facilitate the exploration of life trajectories as socially, culturally and historically contingent. Drawing from both aging and childhood research, the potential applications of life diagrams as a methodological tool for stimulating reflective thinking and giving space to narrativity, as well as the implications for life-course research, will be delineated.

Introduction

In Europe's aging societies, social exclusion in later life poses a significant challenge that reduces societal cohesion and individual quality of life (Scharf & Keating, 2012). While research focusing on the social exclusion of older persons has grown in recent decades (e.g. Seifert et al., 2021; Van Regenmortel et al., 2016), empirical studies on exclusion in later life from a life-course perspective remain scarce (Walsh et al., 2017). Furthermore, longitudinal research demonstrates that positive or negative personal life assessment in old age is intrinsically linked to past experiences (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Vaillant, 2015). A life-course

approach thus emphasizes change and dynamism, counteracting a persistent biomedical view that perceives aging as an inevitable process of deterioration and increased vulnerability (Kim & Moen, 2002).

A life-course perspective is unique as it focuses on the stories people tell (Atkinson, 2002; McAdams, 2005). It considers and explores each period of an individual's life as a process. However, there is a growing realization that established qualitative methodologies, such as the life-story interview or the focus group, fall short when exploring the domain of the non-linguistic or the sensory (Bagnoli, 2009), which has led to the "visual turn" (Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Söderström, 2020). Life stories can be documented in various ways, including the use of graphic elicitation tools that focus on visual representation and narrativity. These techniques have gained increasing popularity in recent years (e.g. Bremner, 2020; De Vries et al., 2017). Graphic elicitation can be helpful for gaining a deeper understanding of what may be implied or difficult to express in words (Gauntlett, 2007), thereby enabling participants to actively shape the direction of an interview. Additionally, graphic elicitation tools do more justice to participants' preferred styles of expression (Söderström, 2020), create methodological space to challenge assumptions of linear temporality and help us to "recognize alternatives and learn from the experiences of […] research participants" (Söderström, 2022, p. 7).

This chapter focuses on the life diagram as a graphic elicitation technique. Life diagrams are a participatory visual method conceived to be both a methodological and an analytical tool for navigating life stories (Söderström, 2020). They are well-suited for aging research for several reasons. Firstly, older research participants tend to rely more on reference points in the past, such as macro-historical events or important life transitions, as strategies for recalling past experiences (Hughes & Touron, 2021). Secondly, as life events are shaped not only by personal contexts but also by broader cultural, social or political structures (Giele & Elder, 1998; Billari, 2015), the life diagram can provide an ideal instrument for understanding how these processes manifest in older persons' lives (Porcellato et al., 2014).

Childhood researchers have also demonstrated that using visual and participatory methods, such as pictorial time-lines with children, can have positive implications, albeit for different reasons: taking a visual approach often means avoiding targeted questions towards children to

obtain information, which demands serious and long-term cognitive engagement, focusing instead on the pictorial representation of a child's experience (Gosse & Roberts, 2014; Ranta & Finegan, 2024).

As qualitative doctoral researchers, one with a background in cultural anthropology and one in psychology, in respectively Belgium (Adult Educational Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussels) and Spain (Social Psychology in the Gerontological field, Universitat de Barcelona), our main objective is to synergize and discuss the methodological reflections that have arisen from our experience of using life diagrams as a data collection tool with older persons, but also to dialogue with childhood research on the topic and to explore how life diagrams can prove useful for understanding earlier and later life. Consequently, we aim to inspire researchers studying childhood as well as later life to use and adapt this technique in their work.

In what follows, we will examine life diagrams in the context of the European research project "Exclusion from Civic Engagement of a Diverse Older Population: Features, Experiences and Policy Implications" (CIVEX). Through reflecting on the use of these life diagrams in our own research on civic engagement in later life, we will argue that they are a valuable tool for (1) constructing the life course as a subjective process that is recreated through storytelling, (2) rethinking the past, such as childhood, (young) adulthood or the future through reflective exercises and (3) understanding life trajectories as socially, culturally and historically contingent. Afterwards, we will reflect on using life diagrams in our study, and we will end through summarizing some methodological implications for childhood and aging research in the future.

CIVEX: Exclusion from civic engagement in later life

Social exclusion in later life is a complex and multidimensional concept that refers to exclusion from important aspects of life, such as material resources, social relationships and also civic engagement (Van Regenmortel et al., 2016). Civic engagement in later life is recognized as a dynamic process, with individuals moving in and out of civic activities throughout their lifetime (Serrat et al., 2019). However, despite its importance, there is a scarcity of empirical research on older persons' exclusion from civic engagement (Torres, 2021).

To address this gap, the CIVEX project seeks to investigate features and experiences of exclusion from civic engagement in later life through using a life-course perspective. The focus within CIVEX is on four potentially marginalized groups of older persons, in four European countries (Belgium, Finland, Spain and Sweden): (1) older persons living in long- term care settings, (2) older persons living at home and who receive social and/or health care via formal services, (3) older persons living in disadvantaged urban areas and (4) older persons who have migrated in adulthood from a non-European country.

In the CIVEX-project, civic engagement is understood from a multidimensional angle through considering social participation as well as political participation, both individually and collectively. Social participation at an individual level includes altruistic and helping behaviors that occur outside or inside the family (e.g. assisting a neighbor or a relative, taking care of grandchildren) as well as financial donations or in-kind support to charities. Social participation at a collective level includes participation in volunteering, community or charitable organizations. Voting, contacting political representatives or signing petitions are considered political participation at an individual level, while collective forms of political participation comprise behaviors such as working on political campaigns, participation in political organizations and participating in protest activities (Serrat et al., 2019). Digital forms of social or political participation are also taken into account.

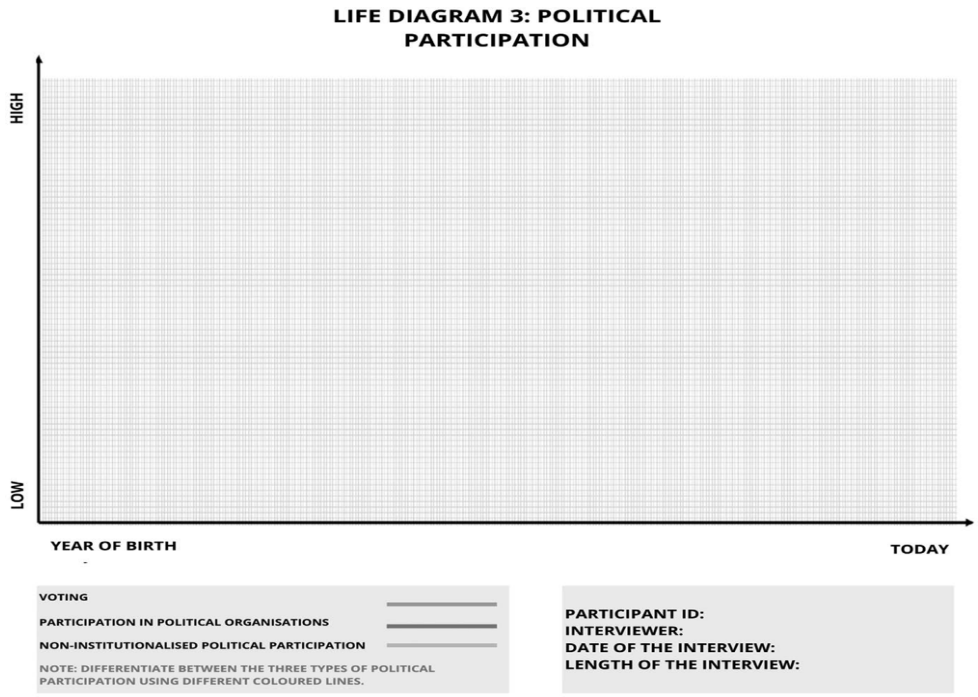
Methodology

We employed life diagrams alongside life-story interviews, focusing on older persons' subjective experience of civic engagement throughout the life course. This chapter will depart from data collected in Belgium and in Spain, where we conducted a total of 96 life diagrams in 2022–2023. We have employed life diagrams next to life-story interviews to understand, in the words of Atkinson (2002, p. 126), "how one person experiences and understands life, his or her own especially, over time". It was our aim to gain deeper insight into the biographical features of older persons' civic engagement, to observe how they moved in and out of civic engagement throughout their lives, and to focus on the participants as storytellers, something which has remained underexplored in social gerontological research (Serrat & Villar, 2019).

We divided the interviews into five parts, with each part reflecting one type of civic engagement: (1) membership in associations, (2) formal volunteering, (3) political participation, (4) informal helping behaviors and (5) digital civic engagement. Consequently, we used five different life diagrams. For each dimension, we asked the participant to draw a line representing their civic engagement through time. **Figure 3.1** shows a prototype of a life diagram (on political engagement). The horizontal axis of the diagram indicates a person's life trajectory from their day of birth to the present. The vertical axis visualizes the intensity (high or low) of a civic activity at any given moment in time. For each diagram, there was one line to draw, except for political engagement, where we subdivided the life diagram into three items: voting, participation in political organizations and non-institutional political engagement (e.g. participating in demonstrations, signing petitions or boycotting products).

The initial contact with participants involved a face-to-face or telephonic introduction, during which the research objectives were explained. Following this, individuals who were keen to participate were selected for an interview, which lasted approximately between one hour and a half and two hours (the length ranging from 42 to 240 minutes).

Figure 3.1: Life Diagram 3: Political Participation.



The interviews were conducted in Dutch, English and French in Belgium, and in Catalan and Spanish in Spain. For purposes of readability, all participants' quotes that are included in this chapter have been translated into English. Participants were invited to choose the location of the interview, most often their own residence (including long-term care facilities), a coffeeshop or a local organization. At the start of the interview, we introduced the life diagrams and conducted a quick survey to see which dimension of civic engagement was most relevant for the participant in question. For instance, if a person had been actively involved in formal volunteering activities, this was the life diagram that we started with. Diagrams were printed out in A4 format (21 × 29,7 cm). Participants were free to not make use of the diagrams, to fill in some but not all, or to complete them in any way they saw fit.

The life diagram as a data collection tool

In this section, we seek to make three arguments, namely that life diagrams (1) emphasize the life course as a subjective process that is recreated through storytelling, (2) enable us to rethink the past, by exploring childhood, (young) adulthood and future through reflective exercises and (3) facilitate the exploration of life trajectories as socially, culturally and historically contingent. We will include participants' stories to contextualize their life-course experiences and give thickness to our arguments.

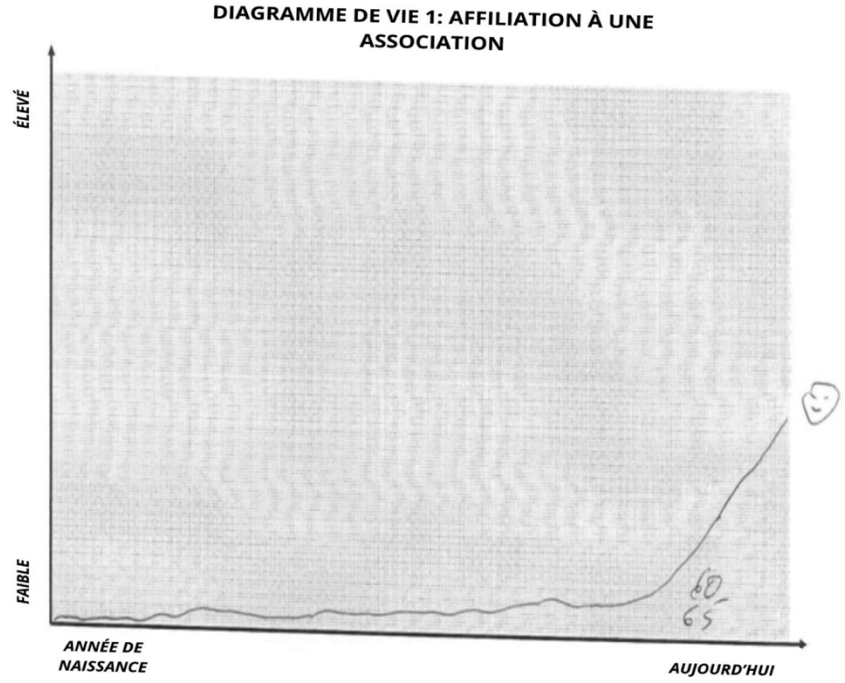
The life course as a story: A subjective process

People are storytellers and to inspire meaning making through the telling of life stories, reflective thinking is important (Atkinson, 2002). To create space for reflection and storytelling during an interview, it is necessary to build confidence between researcher and participant (Birch & Miller, 2000). We have done this through maintaining regular contact with the participants before the interview, creating a relaxed environment during the interview, and remaining open-minded. Additionally, with the use of the life diagrams, we hoped to add an element of informality to the interview that would put participants at ease.

One participant in Belgium, a 67-year-old woman named Maria[1], mentioned several times that she felt "terrible at diagramming". Admitting that she was more of a talker than a draftsperson,

we moved away from the life diagram to concentrate on her oral account. The result was unexpected: she began experimenting with the diagram in a more unobtrusive way and created a timeline of her membership in associations, while simultaneously conversing with us. In the end, she put a little smiley just outside the diagram, demonstrating her eventual positive experience (see **Figure 3.2**). We use Maria's example to illustrate that life diagrams have a unique strength: their flexibility. Even if participants are unsure about completing them, they can be used innovatively to fit the context. Eventually, Maria talked about her experiences of civic engagement, using the diagram to visually support her story and as a point of reference for structuring and expressing her thoughts.

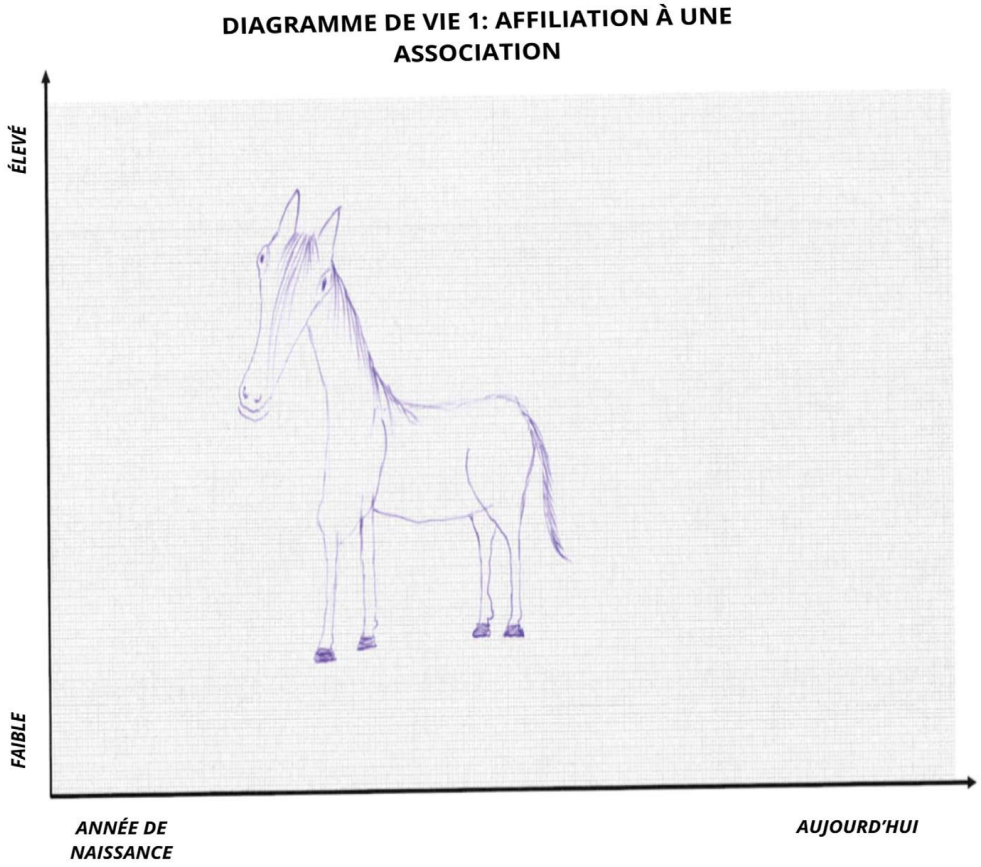
Figure 3.2: Maria's Life Diagram. Text inside the diagram: 60 65.



During the interviews, we encouraged participants to consider the life diagrams as their piece of art and to visualize their life course in their own way, which also meant not following our instructions of drawing a line. As a result, participants often included sentences, and sometimes even dots and illustrations. We purposely used this approach to increase participants' own contribution to the interview, which is one of the main benefits of graphic elicitation techniques (Crilly et al., 2006), and to encourage storytelling. For Claire, a 67-year-old woman living in Belgium, the life diagram provided a pleasant new angle for narrating her life story, following an initial reluctance to speak openly about her life. Emphasizing her freedom to

complete the diagram as she saw fit helped her to include personal details into her life story. For instance, when speaking about her associational membership, she drew a horse (see **Figure 3.3**), while giving us an exhaustive account of her migration from France to Belgium, where she started as a self-employed visual artist in Brussels. She explained that this was hard work and spanned a long period of her adult life. She gave herself fully to her career and did not find time and energy for engaging in associations, something that she used to do regularly during childhood. Claire's life diagram is a compelling example of how the technique spurred storytelling and the sharing of life experiences.

Figure 3.3: Claire's Life Diagram.



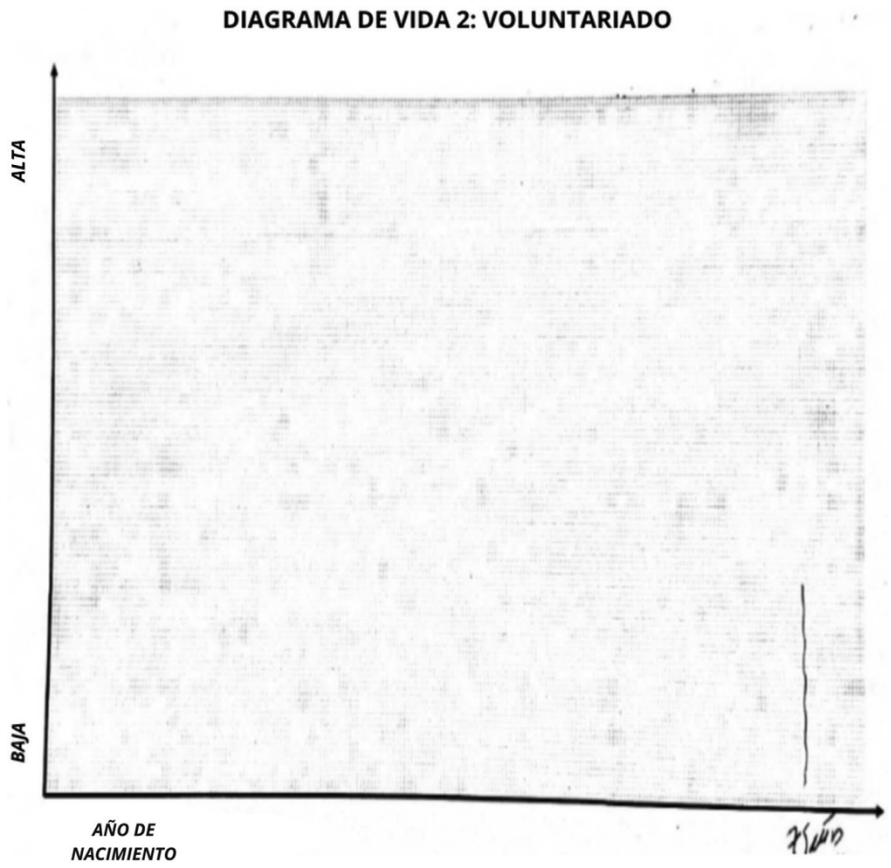
Rethinking the past and future through reflective exercises

Life diagrams make trajectories and transitions clear to both researcher and participant (Söderström, 2022). As such, the life diagrams enabled a renewed reflection on the individual life course, making it easier to navigate different periods of an interviewee's life. Life diagrams give

researcher and participant the freedom to revisit life trajectories in an organic way, as an alternative to the chronological sequence in which life stories are often told (Ferrer et al., 2017).

Jordi, a 75-year-old man born in Spain, recently returned to his country of birth after having lived abroad for more than 45 years. He practically left the life diagram concerning his formal volunteering engagement blank (see **Figure 3.4**). However, the diagram offered the opportunity to explore the absence of formal volunteering in his life. Jordi explained that, as a priest and a member of a religious congregation, he worked as a schoolteacher in Senegal. Some years after his retirement, he went back to Spain, where he had the time and peace of mind to engage in formal volunteering activities.

Figure 3.4: Jordi's Life Diagram. Text inside the diagram: 75 años [75 years old].

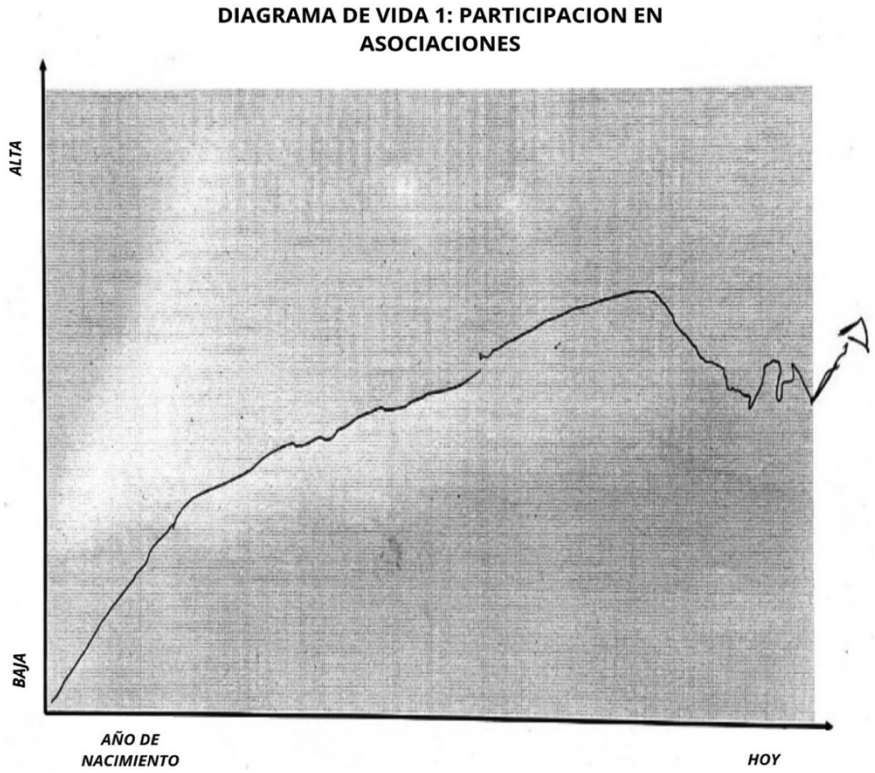


In the interview, Jordi indicated that returning to Spain, where he lives in a disadvantaged neighborhood, motivated him to formally volunteer. He explained that, in Senegal, he learned to acknowledge and be sensitive to cultural, religious and personal diversity, and to not judge others. This self-reflection became a cornerstone for his formal volunteering activities in later life. Jordi

also reflected on the lack of engagement in formal volunteering earlier, recognizing that his religious work absorbed much of his time. Nonetheless, he feels that he made a meaningful contribution to society. The life diagram led Jordi to connect past experiences of civic engagement with his current civic engagement and to reflect on critical life events and transitions (e.g. his migration to Senegal and afterwards his return to Spain). In Jordi's case, life diagrams helped to explore and discuss his life trajectory, such as his religious vocation in Africa or his post-retirement formal volunteering activities. This reflection was possible not because of the accuracy of Jordi's completed life diagram, but because of the discussion that ensued afterwards. For Jordi, life diagrams worked as a visual incentive to reflect on his civic engagement during the life course.

The example of Isabel (a 77-year-old woman, born in Venezuela, who has been living in Spain for seven years) shows us how life diagrams help to link childhood experiences to the present. Isabel is involved in an association that supports and trains migrants in Spain. When we introduced the life diagram (see Figure **3.5**), she remembered her childhood, having migrated three times: from Venezuela to Cuba, from Cuba to the United States of America, and back to Venezuela again.

Figure 3.5: Isabel's Life Diagram



For Isabel, migration was both an obstacle and a facilitator to her civic engagement. In the United States of America, her engagement in associations flourished, which she attributes to the country's emphasis on personal autonomy. Nevertheless, when she came back to Venezuela, her options for engaging in associations she warmed up to (e.g. youth associations, sports club) were limited. She reflected on her childhood through linking her migration at a young age to her migration to Spain at the age of 70. She felt she "was favored by [her] life story", as her experiences as a child helped her to adapt in a new country of residence. The use of the life diagram triggered in Isabel a reconsideration of her childhood, furthering an understanding of her migration as the time when her current engagement in associations began.

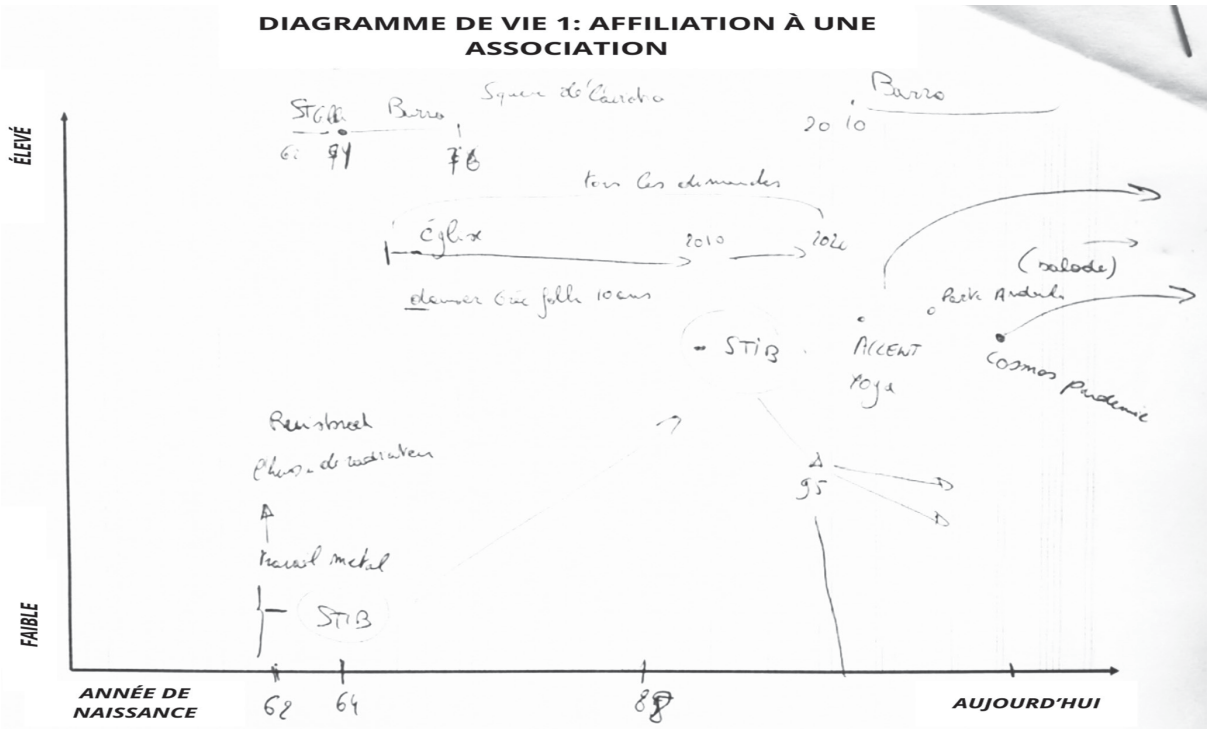
Other participants also reminisced about their childhood. Magdalena, a 72-year-old woman who has been living in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Spain for almost 50 years, narrated how, as a child, she suffered severe burns in a fire. Even though the accident posed obstacles to her civic engagement at different points in her life, she felt that the experience has made her more altruistic in the long run. Directly after the event, she started visiting children in hospitals. She currently gives support to older persons living alone and to people living with a disability. She also volunteers in her neighborhood church. Her engagement has been continuous ever since the accident, indicating that this life event has allowed her "to understand people's illness and their pain much better".

Finally, while life diagrams can promote reflections of the past, they can also stimulate discussions of the future. This is important as imagining one's personal future is important for making sense of past experiences and affirming one's identity (Ramsgaard et al., 2019). Sophia, an 84-year-old woman of Greek descent living in Brussels, was eager to carry on with her current engagement in associations, which she visualizes through arrows in the life diagram (see **Figure 3.6**).

Sophia explained that, after a lifetime of working and family duties, she highly values her freedom now. Her life story produces a philosophy in which enjoying each new day to the fullest is central. Her age is not an obstacle for current and future civic engagement, because, in her own words, "I don't see age, I am getting older, but every day offers something new, and that keeps me going", summarizing her optimism for the future. At the same time, however, when confronted with the question of future goals, there was caution in her voice. She emphasized the transient nature of

her engagement in associations (e.g., participating in events at the local community center, supporting the Greek community), indicating that the future might bring new and positive things, but "tomorrow I could be sick or even dead as well", showcasing an interesting and complex equilibrium between an ambitious future outlook and the acceptance that her health might deteriorate.

Figure 3.6: Sophia's Life Diagram. Text inside the diagram: Ruisbroek, L'usine de radiateur: Travail metal: STIB: Sint Gillis – Barra – Square de l'aviation – 72 – 74 – 76 – 2010 – Barra: Tous les dimanches – église 2010–2020: Danser Gréc folk 10 ans: STIB: Accent: Yoga: Porte Anderlecht: Balade: Cosmos pandémie. [Ruisbroek, Radiator plant: Metal work: STIB: Sint-Gillis – Barra – Square de l'aviation – 72 – 74 – 76 – 2010: Barra: Each Sunday – Church – 2010 – 2020: Greek folk dancing 10 years: STIB: Accent: Yoga: Porte Anderlecht: Walk: Cosmos pandemic]. Text outside the diagram (below): 62, 64, 88.



Life trajectories as socially, culturally and historically contingent

As older persons' civic engagement is intrinsically linked to a broader context, considering where, when and on which level engagement takes place is key for understanding the phenomenon (Serrat et al., 2019). Additionally, biographies of individuals are embedded in specific socio-cultural and historical periods (Elder & Giele, 2009). Hence, we found that life diagrams are useful tools for focusing on the macro-context, something that Elder (1994, p. 5) calls "lives and historical time",

to refer to the ways in which our lives form part of broader socio-political structures that change through time. Life diagrams are there- fore well-suited for bringing together individual-level features of exclusion with macro-level issues, for instance inequality and disadvantage (Milne, 2022).

The macro-context is a significant factor that maintains, promotes or hinders the civic engagement of older persons. Therefore, looking at this engagement without taking into account the bigger picture could result in a research bias. In fact, studies that use life stories help us to understand important socio-political processes that occur at the macro-level, interpreted through the eyes of the participant (e.g. Gutiérrez-García et al., 2021). In this way, life diagrams are well-suited for capturing and understanding broader socio-historical and socio-political contexts that shape individual life choices and trajectories. The life diagrams provide a platform for discussion about how these contexts shape trajectories of civic engagement and current-day civic engagement in later life.

In our fieldwork, we came across several examples of how the macro-context shaped civic engagement trajectories. In Spain, the dictatorship between 1939 and 1975 played an important role. Not surprisingly, research participants who lived through this period expressed its impact on their political engagement, ranging from the inability to vote to the increase in their non-institutionalized or clandestine political activities. In both Belgium and Spain, a considerable number of older persons who migrated to the country in adulthood referred to the socio-political context in their country of birth or even globally as a factor shaping their political engagement. Many of them had their first voting experience when they were in their late twenties or even later, while in other cases, political engagement (including voting) was forcibly interrupted in adulthood. For instance, for Fatma, a 60-year-old woman of Moroccan descent, arriving in Belgium meant suddenly finding herself in a political context where voting is mandatory. She reflected on this through life diagrams, regretting not voting in her home country in the past. She now dedicates herself to stop the spread of, in her own words, “repressive politics” and “a growing nationalist sentiment”.

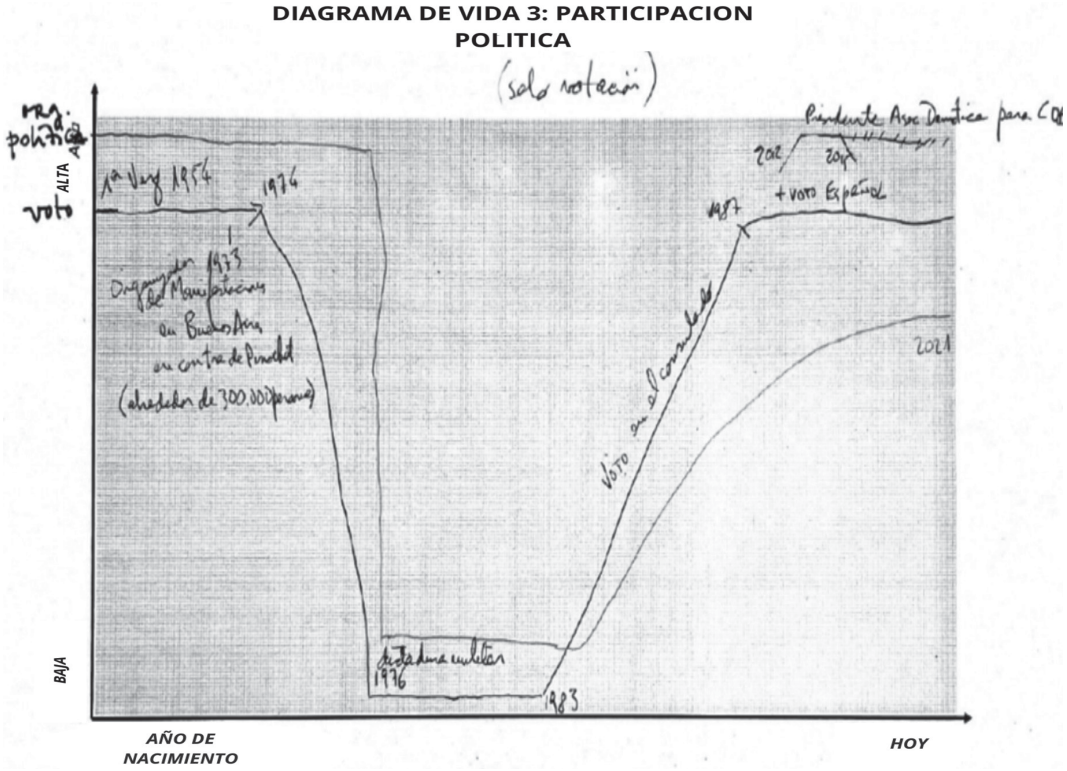
Fernando, a 77-year-old man who migrated from Argentina to Spain at the age of 40, explained that the anti-democratic socio-political context in his country of birth, during the Argentinian

dictatorship, spurred his involvement in non-institutional political engagement through a clandestine (guerrilla) organization. Consequently, Fernando was able to flourish civically in an extremely repressive political context. His engagement against the regime was prolific during this period, at times even putting his own life at risk, providing, for instance, shelter to politically persecuted dissidents. He eventually left Argentina for Venezuela, living there for ten years before coming to Spain. The Venezuelan socio-political and economic crisis of the past decades caused a significant wave of migration and displacement, which triggered Fernando to help persons leaving the country to which he still feels emotionally connected. In Spain, he now works as a dentist, where he treats Venezuelan migrants free of charge. He describes his civic engagement as "human solidarity". Macro-contextual features thus emerge as an ideological compass for his civic engagement, which was visualized and discussed through life diagrams (see **Figure 3.7**).

In Belgium, István, an 80-year-old man born in Hungary, initially drew a horizontal line when talking about his political engagement, saying that he "had no interest in politics" and did not want to "concern himself with a bunch of idiots", the word he used to refer to politicians in general (see **Figure 3.8**). He did not want to draw or talk about political issues. We persisted through referring to the life diagram, and asked him if there really had not been any period of political engagement in his life. István opened up and started talking about his military service in Hungary from '59 until '62, which was a tense period, because it was just after the construction of the Berlin Wall. After moving to Belgium in 1964, he felt he could not engage in voicing political opinions, because he suspected that he was being monitored by security services, greatly restricting his movement and also his civic engagement.

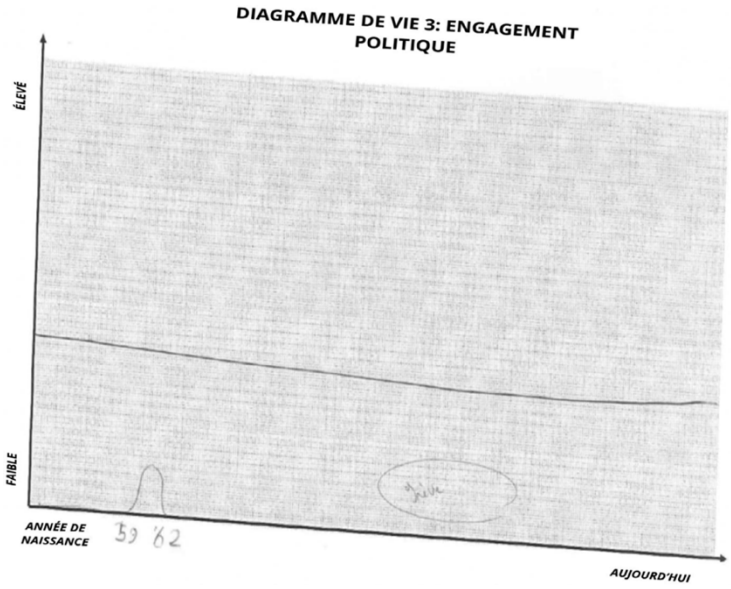
These examples demonstrate how life diagrams in some cases motivated the retelling of trajectories of civic engagement throughout the life course, through seeing these trajectories as molded by an overshadowing social, cultural or historical context, facilitating dialogue around macro-level influences.

Figure 3.7: Life Diagram: Civic Engagement. Text inside the diagram: voto primera vez: 1974, 1976–1983: dictadura militar, 1983–1987: voto en el Consulado, 1987: + voto España; 2012–2015: Presidente de Asociación Democrática para Colegio de Odontólogos; 1973: organización de manifestaciones en Buenos Aires en contra de Pinochet (alrededor de 300.000 personas) [first vote: 1974, 1976–1983: military dictatorship, 1983–1987: vote in the Consulate, 1987 + Spanish vote; 2012–2015: President of the Democratic Association for the College of Dentists; 1973: organization of demonstrations in Buenos Aires against Pinochet



(around 300.000 people).

Figure 3.8: Life Diagram: Civic Engagement. Text inside the diagram: Grève [Strike]. Text outside the diagram (below): '59 '62.



Methodological reflections

Here, we will present and discuss the most noteworthy methodological reflections of using life diagrams in our research, with the objective of dialoguing with childhood research. Life diagrams have proven to be important vehicles for considering the rich and often complex life trajectories of older persons. Their life stories counter ageist stereotypes that highlight the negative connotations that are often associated with aging. As "childism" can also be a variant of ageism that paints a picture of children as inexperienced and thus incompetent (Lalani, 2024), we would like to ponder on the role of life diagrams as important tools for empowerment and fostering understanding at both sides of the life course. This is especially important in a time where the contributions of older persons as well as children are undervalued and often dismissed in policy making and research (Lamb, 2017; Ranta & Finegan, 2024).

In our opinion, the presence of graphic elicitation tools during our research with older persons was often advantageous. Visual tools such as life diagrams often deepened the understanding of a life story and they were an important tool for reflection (Söderström, 2020). Research on childhood has equally experimented with pictorial or visual methodological tools to better comprehend the temporal experience of children (Gosse & Roberts, 2014; Tillman et al., 2018). In most of these studies, stimulating dialogue is highlighted as the intended outcome rather than creating a faithful retelling of events (e.g. Crivello, 2017).

Decades of research focusing on visual methodologies with children has shown that visual objects are beneficial for their recollection and understanding of content (O'Farrelly & Tatlow-Golden, 2022), although there is no consensus regarding children's universal understanding of the representational meaning of visual tools and their ability to use them appropriately in a research setting. For instance, some research has indicated that, as children are still in the process of developing awareness of temporality and linguistic ability, the use of timelines in research is not more beneficial than employing oral interviews, especially if the timeline uses more complex time measurement such as weeks, months or years (Zhang, 2020). It seems therefore important for childhood researchers working with graphic elicitation techniques to constantly consider the cognitive development of children at different ages.

In our research, there were both practical (related to the organization and structure of the interview) and (inter-)personal (having to do with the participant or the interaction between participant and interviewer) difficulties to using life diagrams, which we will briefly consider here. Regarding the practical difficulties, completing the life diagrams was often an exhausting exercise, especially as there were five diagrams to cover. (Inter-)personal difficulties revolved around language barriers, as some of our participants were older persons with a non-European migrant background, for whom, in the case of Belgium, the interview language (French, English or Dutch) was often not the mother tongue. The life diagram was a tool to surpass these language constraints, although the life-story interview and narrativity still carried the most weight in our research. Childhood research addresses the fact that children's cognitive abilities are constantly evolving (Zhang, 2020). It might thus also be useful for childhood researchers to think of methodological frameworks that prioritize visual qualitative techniques that surpass language barriers for future studies.

Other noteworthy reasons for not making use of a life diagram in our fieldwork were (1) sensorial or physical disabilities; (2) not feeling comfortable during the execution; (3) "not being smart enough" to understand the life diagrams; (4) fearing that one might forget important life events and (5) simply preferring talking over drawing. We continuously underscored that there were no accurate or inaccurate contributions and, if participants continued to be hesitant, we helped them with the diagrams, while doing our best to respect their preferences and agency (e.g. describing the life diagrams as their own "piece of art", or emphasizing that they can be filled in in any way they wanted).

Methodological implications for future research on childhood and aging

We will summarize the most salient methodological implications for future research, hoping they will benefit childhood and aging researchers in the future. We recommend to not overuse life diagrams, as we found that using five life diagrams in the same interview often overburdened participants. Possible alternatives that provide solutions for time constraints and participant fatigue are "take-home" life diagrams (Bremner, 2020), member checking interviews (Doyle, 2007) or paired interviews (Lohm & Kirpitchenko, 2014). Qualitative longitudinal research has also been proposed as advantageous, mainly in childhood research, as it can give better insight in transitions, turning points and changes throughout the life course or in different temporal dimensions of

experience (Crivello, 2017; Holland et al., 2004). The above examples are just a few illustrations of techniques that overcome temporal constraints during the life-story interview. They can also be useful to further test data and interpretations with participants and to expand a participatory framework that stimulates negotiation of meaning between participant and researcher, or even among participants themselves.

Furthermore, we suggest adapting life diagrams to the intricacies of the respective age group one focuses on. For instance, research shows that the narrative development of children, as well as their growing understanding of temporality, is geared towards identity formation later in life. In childhood research, it has been argued that visual tools can promote the examination of future objectives by children and young people, exploring hopes and perspectives about what is still to come in various domains (e.g. school, work) (Crivello, 2017). In the case of older persons, the experience of time tends to change, with equal or sometimes even more attention given to experiences in the past (Randall, 2022). Nevertheless, future ambitions are important to be taken into account in life-course research, regarding both older persons and children. We propose the adaptation of life diagrams in such a way that they can stimulate an exploration of the future. In our research, discussion of the life diagram mostly ended in the present, hampering a deeper discussion of what might come next.

It is also important for life-course researchers to explore the perspective of persons who are excluded for linguistic reasons, such as older migrants or young children. Experimenting with graphic elicitation techniques as the primary method of data collection could surpass language barriers and stimulate interaction with persons with limited proficiency of the dominant language (see Garcia-Retamero & Dhami, 2011). Examples here are relational maps (Bagnoli, 2009), photovoice techniques (Aw et al., 2021) or photo-narrative processes (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014).

To learn more about putting participants at ease, childhood research provides some excellent good practices. For one, it is pivotal to attend carefully to signs of rejection or discomfort during the life-story interview and to reflect on possible power dynamics (Cree et al., 2002). Emotional reciprocity is key here (Söderström, 2022). Since research participants are asked to share the ups and downs of their life, researchers need to be responsive to their emotions and keep an open mind. For future research, we might also consider using more supporting materials to promote emotional

reciprocity and to make the interviews more appealing to participants in general. One could think of stickers or classroom material, such as stamps and color markers, which have been proven useful in earlier participatory research (e.g., Dennis & Huf, 2020; MacFarlane et al., 2017).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we argue in favor of using life diagrams in qualitative life-course research, for three main reasons. First, life diagrams do justice to the subjectivity of life stories while facilitating narrativity through visual means. Second, life diagrams make it easier to rethink past and future through reflective exercises. Third, life diagrams help to construe life trajectories as socially, culturally and historically contingent. We have also listed some key challenges, as they can be tiring, exhaustive, or not well understood. We hope that the provided examples from our own fieldwork prove useful for future researchers working with life stories.

We can only underscore the strength of life diagrams as a tool for inspiring reflective thinking and creating meaningful reference points in aging and childhood research. We strongly believe that the tool has high potential, but it requires flexibility and creativity, and therefore active engagement from the researcher, to make sure it is used to its fullest. We wish to inspire both researchers on childhood and on later life to explore new avenues by means of graphic elicitation. This will bring us one step further to doing justice to the life stories on both sides of the life course, older persons and children, which are often overlooked, through approaching them as a narrative, but certainly also a reflective, process.

Note

[1] Throughout this text, we use pseudonyms and not the participants' real names to respect their privacy.

References

Atkinson, R. (2002). The life story interview. In J. F. Gubrium, & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 121–140). Sage Publications.

Aw, S., Koh, G. C. H. K., Oh, Y. J., Wong, M. L., Vrijhoef, H. J. M., Harding, S. C., Geronimo, M. A. B., & Hildon, Z. J.-L. (2021). Interacting with place and mapping community needs to context: Comparing and triangulating multiple geospatial-qualitative methods using the Focus–Expand–Compare approach. *Methodological Innovations*, 14(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799120987772

Bagnoli, A. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: The use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. *Qualitative Research*, 9(5), 547–570. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941093436

Billari, F. C. (2015). Integrating macro- and micro-level approaches in the explanation of population change. *Population Studies*, 69(suppl. 1), S11–S20. https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2015.1009712

Birch, M., & Miller, T. (2000). Inviting intimacy: The interview as therapeutic opportunity. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(3), 189–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570083689

Böök, M. L., & Mykkänen, J. (2014). Photo-narrative processes with children and young people. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 5(4.1), 611–628. https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs.bookml.5412014

Boxenbaum, E., Jones, C., Meyer, R. E., & Svejenova, S. (2018). Towards an articulation of the material and visual turn in organization studies. *Organization Studies*, 39(5–6), 597–616. https://doi.org/10.1177/017084061877261

Bremner, N. (2020). Time for timelines: The take-home timeline as a tool for exploring complex life histories. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1–13. http://doi.org/10.1177/160940692094897

Cree, V. E., Kay, H., & Tisdall, K. (2002). Research with children: Sharing the dilemmas. *Child and Family Social Work*, 7(1), 47–56. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2206.2002.00223.x

Crilly, N., Blackwell, A. F., & Clarkson, P. J. (2006). Graphic elicitation: Using research diagrams as interview stimuli. *Qualitative Research*, 6(3), 341–366. http://doi.org/10.1177/14687941060650

Crivello, G. (2017). Qualitative longitudinal research with children and young people. In R. Evans, & L. Holt (Eds.), *Methodological approaches* (pp. 423–449). Springer Singapore.

De Vries, B., Leblanc, A. J., Frost, D. M., Alston-Stepnitz, E., Stephenson, R., & Woodyatt, C. (2017). The relationship timeline: A method for the study of shared lived experiences in relational contexts. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 32, 55–64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2016.07.002

Dennis, B., & Huf, C. (2020). Ethnographic research in childhood institutions: Participations and entanglements. *Ethnography and Education*, 15(4), 445–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823. 2020.1722951

Doyle, S. (2007). Member checking with older women: A framework for negotiating meaning. *Health Care for Women International*, 28(10), 888–908. https://doi.org/10.1080/07399330701615325

Elder, G. H. Jr. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1), 4–15. https://doi.org/10.2307/2786971

Elder, G. H. Jr., & Giele, J. Z. (2009). Life course studies: An evolving field. In G. H. Elder Jr., & J. Z. Giele (Eds.), *The craft of life course research* (pp. 1–24). The Guilford Press.

Ferrer, I., Grenier, A., Brotman, S., & Koehn, S. (2017). Understanding the experiences of racialized older people through an intersectional life course perspective. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 41, 10–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2017.02.001

Garcia-Retamero, R., & Dhami, M. K. (2011). "Pictures speak louder than numbers: On communicating medical risks to immigrants with limited non-native language proficiency. *Health Expectations*, 14(Suppl. 1), 46–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1369-7625.2011.00670.x

Gauntlett, D. (2007). Introduction. In D. Gauntlett (Ed.), *Creative explorations: New approaches to identities and audiences* (pp. 1–13). Routledge.

Giele, J. Z., & Elder, G. H. Jr (1998). Life course research: Development of a field. In J. Z. Giele, & G. H. Elder Jr. (Eds.), *Methods of life course research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (pp. 5–27). SAGE.

Gosse, L. L., & Roberts, K. P. (2014). Children's use of a 'Time Line' to indicate when events occurred. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 29, 36–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-013-9118-x

Gutiérrez-García, A. I., Solano-Ruiz, C., Siles-Gonzalez, J., & Perpiña-Galvañ, J. (2021). Life histories and lifelines: A methodological symbiosis for the study of female genital

mutilation. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–11. http://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211040 96

Holland, J., Thomson, R., & Henderson, S. (2004). "*Qualitative Longitudinal Research: A Discussion Paper*". www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods/feasibility_study.pdf

Hughes, M. L., & Touron, D. R. (2021). Aging in context: Incorporating everyday experiences into the study of subjective age. *Front Psychiatry*, 12, 633234. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.633234

Kim, J. E., & Moen, P. (2002). Retirement transitions, gender, and psychological well-being: A life-course, ecological model. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B*, 57(3), 212–222. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/57.3.P212

Lalani, Melanie. (2024) "Learning from Each Other: An Exploration of Relational Caring Between People Living with Dementia and Young Children". In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking ages: A dialogue between ageing and childhood research* (pp. 49–65). Routledge.

Lamb, S. (2017). Successful aging as a contemporary obsession: *Global perspectives*. Rutgers University Press.

Lohm, D., & Kirpitchenko, L. (2014). "Interviewing pairs: Discussions on migration and identity". In *SAGE research methods cases part 1*. SAGE Publications, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013509356

MacFarlane, A., Galvin, R., O'Sullivan, M., McInerney, C., Meagher, E., Burke, D., & LeMaster, J. W. (2017). Participatory methods for research prioritization in primary care: An Analysis of the world café approach in Ireland and the USA. *Family Practice*, 34(3), 278–284. https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/cmw104

McAdams, D. (2005). Studying lives in time: A narrative approach. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 10, 237–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1040-2608(05)10009-4

Milne, A. (2022). The lifecourse and old age. In S. Torres, & S. Donnelly (Eds.), *Critical gerontology for social workers* (pp. 19–34). Policy Press.

Mroczek, D. K., & Spiro, A. III (2005). Change in life satisfaction during adulthood: Findings from the veterans affairs normative aging study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(1), 189–202. http://doi.org/10.1037/00223514.88.1.189

O'Farrelly, C., & Tatlow-Golden, M. (2022). It's up to you if you want to take part. Supporting young children's informed choice about research participation with simple visual booklets.

European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 30(1), 63–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X. 2022.2026434

Porcellato, L., Carmichael, F., & Hulme, C. (2014). Using occupational history calendars to capture lengthy and complex working lives: A mixed method approach with older people. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19(3), 269–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.988005

Ramsgaard, S. B., Bohn, A., & Thastum, M. (2019). Past and future life stories in adolescents with anxiety disorders: A comparison with community controls. *Memory*, 27(7), 998–1010. https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2019.1595660

Randall, W. L. (2022). The philosophic homework of later life on narrative, wisdom, and the positive potential of growing old. In A. Teodorescu, & D. Chiribucă (Eds.), *Shaping ageing. Social transformations and enduring meanings*. Routledge.

Ranta, M., and Trish Finegan. (2024). "I wish they'd stop eating the props!' – two novice researchers' reflection on their participatory research with children and older people." In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking ages: A dialogue between ageing and childhood research* (pp. 49–65). Routledge.

Scharf, T., & Keating, N. (2012). Social exclusion in later life: A global challenge. In T. Scharf, & N. Keating (Eds.), *From exclusion to inclusion in old age: A global challenge* (pp. 1–16). The Policy Press.

Seifert, A., Cotten, S. R., & Xie, B. (2021). A double burden of exclusion? Digital and social exclusion of older adults in times of COVID-19. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 76(3), e99–e103. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa098

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., Villar, F., & Gómez, C. (2019). Fifty-five years of research into older people's civic participation: Recent trends, future directions. *The Gerontologist*, 60(1), e38–e51. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz021

Serrat, R., & Villar, F. (2019). Lifecourse transitions and participation in political organisations in older Spanish men and women. *Ageing & Society*, 40(10), 2174–2190. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X19000618

Söderström, J. (2020). Life diagrams: A methodological and analytical tool for accessing life histories. *Qualitative Research*, 20(1), 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941188190

Söderström, J. (2022). Life histories and life diagrams. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), Handbook of qualitative cross-cultural research methods: *A social science perspective* (pp. 195–212). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Tillman, K. A., Tulagan, N., Fukuda, E., & Barner, D. (2018). The mental timeline is gradually constructed in childhood. *Developmental Science*, 21(6), e12679 . https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12679

Torres, S. (2021). Introduction: Framing civic exclusion. In K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. Van Regenmortel, & A. Wanka (Eds.), *Social exclusion in later life: Interdisciplinary and policy perspectives, international perspectives on aging*, 28 (pp. 239–243). Springer.

Vaillant, G. E. (2015). *Triumphs of experience. The men of the Harvard grant study*. Belknap Press, Harvard University Press.

Van Regenmortel, S., De Donder, L., Dury, S., Smetcoren, A.-S., De Witte, N., & Verté, D. (2016). Social exclusion in later life: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Population Ageing,* 9(4), 315–344. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12062-016-9145-3

Walsh, K., Scharf, T., & Keating, N. (2017). Social exclusion of older persons: A scoping review and conceptual framework. *European Journal of* , 14, 81–98. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433- 016-0398-8

Zhang, H. H. (2020) "An Evaluation of the Timeline as a Memory Retrieval Aid for Children's Recall of Specific Details from a Repeated Event." *Doctoral Theses*, Wilfrid Laurier University. https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/2236

PART 3:

EMPIRICAL PAPERS

Chapter 4:
Civic Engagement in Later Life in Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods: An Environmental Perspective

Chapter 4:

Civic Engagement in Later Life in Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods:

An Environmental Perspective

Abstract

Research on aging and neighborhoods often focuses on how neighborhood features shape older adults' lives, overlooking their contributions. This study addresses this gap by exploring how older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods perceive their civic engagement as both shaping and being shaped by the neighborhood environment. Guided by an environmental perspective, which views the relationship between people and their environment as bi-directional, we thematically analyze life-story interviews (n=60) with older adults (minimum age: 65) in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Belgium, Finland, Spain and Sweden (n=15 per country). The results highlight three key themes regarding how participants discuss their civic engagement: 1) the relevance of meaningful neighborhood interactions, 2) the dual role of the socio-economic context, and 3) the importance of the socio-physical environment. Participants describe the relationship with their neighborhoods as bi-directional and shaped through the life course. Meaningful interactions shaped their civic engagement, but their engagement also changed social networks in the neighborhood. Moreover, disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can be catalysts for civic engagement. They both enable and constrain engagement, with participants undertaking activities to counteract adverse changes. Participants also emphasize the role of the socio-physical environment, particularly neighborhood organizations, in facilitating their civic engagement, and they discuss efforts to reshape this environment. This study suggests that environment and civic engagement are deeply intertwined, connecting to neighborhood change. Civic engagement may even serve as a response to adversity. Overall, the results demonstrate the dynamic interplay between changing neighborhood environments and older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Introduction

Research on older adults' civic engagement has received increasing attention (e.g., Buffel, Doran, & Yarker, 2024; Stoecker & Witkovsky, 2022; Serrat, 2025). While much of the existing research on the topic has focused on individual-level characteristics, such as age, gender, education level, or health, it often overlooks the role of environmental features that shape civic engagement in later life (Serrat, Scharf, Villar et al., 2020). These include social networks and physical environment features, which significantly shape the civic engagement of older adults (Dury, Brosens, Smetcoren et al., 2020). Older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are particularly at risk of social and spatial exclusion, which can limit their opportunities for civic engagement (Prattley, Buffel, Marshall, & Nazroo, 2020; Scharf, Philipson, & Smith, 2005). However, they also actively contribute to shaping their neighborhoods (Hand, Laliberte, Huot et al., 2020). This study, therefore, explores how older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods perceive their neighborhood environment, both in terms of how this environment shapes their civic engagement and how they, in turn, contribute to shaping it through their engagement.

Multidimensional civic engagement

Civic engagement can play a critical role in later life, offering older adults a host of opportunities to contribute to their communities. It can be defined as "unpaid, non-professional activities aimed at seeking improved benefits for others, the community, or wider society, or influencing collective decision-making processes" (Serrat, Scharf. & Villar, 2022, p. 621). However, much of the research on civic engagement in urban environments disproportionately focuses on middle-aged, highly educated, white men from affluent neighborhoods (Tonkens & Verhoeven, 2019), often overlooking the contributions of older adults, particularly those in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Uitermark, 2015). These contributions are frequently perceived as informal (e.g., helping with groceries or financial transactions between neighbors), but can also entail participation in grassroots community efforts. According to Dean (2022) and Martinez, Crooks, Kim et al. (2011), these activities are not adequately captured by traditional civic engagement frameworks that prioritize formal engagement.

To address these limitations, this study adopts Serrat's (2025) multidimensional framework of civic engagement in later life. This framework incorporates formal political participation (e.g., voting or working for a party or candidate), informal political actions (e.g., protests, petitions), formal volunteering (e.g., community work, membership in an association), and informal help (e.g., assisting neighbors), as well as digital civic engagement (Seifert & Rössel, 2021). Such a broad conceptualization allows for a more nuanced understanding of civic engagement across diverse contexts, including disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods

Most people now live in cities, with older adults (65+) comprising about one-fifth of urban populations in OECD countries (UN Habitat, 2022; OECD, 2021). Older adults in urban neighborhoods face challenges like urban degeneration and demographic shifts (Buffel & Phillipson, 2023). The WHO's age-friendly cities framework (2017) and global efforts to enhance urban livability (e.g., Mahmood, Seetharaman, Jenkins, & Chaudhury, 2022) highlight the need to study their civic engagement. The neighborhood environment is key to shaping engagement (Dury, Brosens, Smetcoren et al., 2020; Hand, Laliberte, Huot et al., 2020), especially for older adults who socialize and participate locally (Genge, McNeil, Debergue, & Freeman, 2023). In disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, often marked by poverty, unemployment, crime, and weak social networks, civic engagement faces unique challenges (Buffel, Yarker, Phillipson et al., 2023; Granbom, Jönson, & Kottorp, 2022). Social cohesion, safety, and community infrastructure play pivotal roles in either enabling or hindering civic engagement (Cheung & Mui, 2023; Lim & Laurence, 2015), demonstrating the influence of environmental factors.

Environmental features are often divided into social and physical dimensions. The social environment includes factors such as neighborhood cohesion, perceived safety, and socio-economic status (Duppen, Van Der Elst, Dury et al., 2019), while physical environmental features are often represented by the built environment. The latter encompasses human-made spaces like public transportation, neighborhood organizations, and other places that support social interactions (Finlay, Esposito, Kim et al., 2019; Domènech-Abella, Mundó, Leonardi et

al., 2020). However, obstacles in the built environment, such as limited public transportation or inaccessible government buildings (Parekh, Maleku, Fields et al., 2018), and the social environment, such as a lack of perceived neighborhood safety (Cheung & Mui, 2023; Grinshteyn & Sugar, 2021), can pose significant barriers to older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. These dimensions are deeply interconnected, as physical and built spaces often provide the setting for social interactions, underscoring the concept of a socio-physical environment (Wahl & Gitlin, 2019).

While environmental challenges can hinder civic engagement, disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can also foster community-building and informal care (Martinez, Crooks, Kim, & Tanner, 2011; Parekh, Maleku, Fields et al., 2018). Neighborhood organizations, for example, can facilitate neighborly interactions and promote various forms of civic engagement (Farrer, 2023). However, more research is needed to understand how older adults exercise agency in response to adverse environmental conditions and neighborhood changes (Wanka, 2018). By shifting the attention away from viewing neighborhoods as static entities that shape older adults' engagement toward recognizing them as dynamic spaces shaped by older adults' civic activities (Hand, Laliberte, Huot et al., 2020), this study aims to contribute to the emerging body of work that places agency at the forefront of urban aging research. Moreover, because research on civic engagement in later life has thus far disregarded older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, this study brings attention to this group. As such, it examines their experiences of civic engagement. Specifically, it explores their perspectives on how the neighborhood environment shapes their civic engagement and how they, in turn, feel their civic engagement contributes to shaping the environment. The study is guided by two research questions:

1. **Do older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods think that the neighborhood environment shapes their civic engagement, and if so, how?**

2. **Do older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods think their civic engagement has brought about changes in their neighborhood, and if so, how?**

Methods

Research design

This study was conducted as part of the four-country-multi-method consortium called 'CIVEX: Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Determinants, experiences, and policy implications', which was funded through the fourth call of the Joint Programme Initiative More Years Better Lives. To provide maximal transparency, the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist was used, which detail what should be included in qualitative reporting. The methodological orientation that supported the research design is a life course approach, through making use of life story interviews.

Participants

Between 2021 and 2022, we recruited older adults living in disadvantaged urban areas in Belgium, Finland, Spain, and Sweden. Participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- Aged 65 and over;
- Recruited through location-based convenience sampling or via a gatekeeper (often a neighborhood organization) who deemed participants capable of managing the interview and/or through snowball sampling;
- Living in a disadvantaged urban area.

We identified indicators for disadvantaged urban areas, including high unemployment rates, low income levels, area neglect, and a lack of community cohesion. We used country-specific datasets for identifying these areas:

- In Belgium, we selected neighborhoods in Brussels using the 'Wijkmonitoring Brussels' (2021-2022) dataset;
- In Finland, we identified neighborhoods using a local socio-economic neighborhood index (dataset not specified to avoid possible allusions to the studied areas);
- In Spain, we used the Small Area Socioeconomic Index (IST), developed by the Statistical Institute of Catalonia;

- In Sweden, we relied on two indexes: the socio-economic index (RegSO), developed jointly by the former national authority against segregation (DELMOS) and Statistics Sweden (SCB), and the police authorities' mapping of so-called vulnerable areas.

In total, 60 persons (15 from each country) participated, including 32 women and 28 men. Interviews took place in public places or at participants' homes. No third person was present. Their average age was 75.8 years and their average length of residence in the neighborhood was 37.1 years.

While some countries identified disadvantaged urban "areas", this study uses "neighborhood" instead, as people relate more strongly to this concept. Following other studies (e.g., Dury, Willems, De Witte et al., 2016; Milton, Pliakas, Hawkesworth et al., 2015) that engage with neighborhoods as subjective and fluid, we align with participants' self-defined interpretations of where the neighborhood begins and ends. However, during the interviews, some participants referred to the "area" or "district" they lived in, and these terms are used interchangeably in the results section.

Instruments

For each interview, we conducted a short survey covering demographic, socio-economic, and health-related factors. The survey was created to ensure the collection of essential background information required for the sample. The questions included age, gender, education level, self-rated health, limitations in daily activities, household financial situation, marital status, household composition, area of residence, length of residence in the neighborhood, former or current occupation, and country of birth. Additionally, the survey incorporated a civic engagement questionnaire developed by Theocaris and van Deth (2018), in which participants indicated whether they had engaged in any of 20 specified civic activities over the past year.

We used a semi-structured interview methodology for data collection, guided by a life course framework, with three main sections. In the first section, we explored participants' perspectives on civic engagement, their first experience with it, and their current involvement, if any.

The second section, structured around five dimensions of civic engagement (i.e., associational membership, formal volunteering, political engagement, digital civic engagement, and informal help), followed a life-course approach. Participants reflected on how their engagement in each dimension had evolved. They also discussed whether living in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood had been a barrier or an enabler for each dimension. To facilitate discussion and self-reflection, we used life diagrams, which are visual elicitation tools fostering dialogue and reflexivity (Dikmans and Chacur, 2024; Söderström, 2020).

In the third section, we invited participants to share moments when they felt included in civic activities, as well as instances where they felt excluded. We encouraged detailed descriptions of these experiences, including the context, people involved, actions taken, emotions, and the significance of these events for them.

Procedure

We obtained ethical approval for the study in all countries: Belgium (Institutional Review Board VUB: Human Sciences Ethics Committee ECHW_324 / Date ethical approval: 8 December 2021), Finland (The Board for Research Ethics at Åbo Akademi University (FEN)/ Date ethical approval: 29 November 2021), Spain (Institutional Review Board IRB00003099 / Date ethical approval: 10 December 2021), and Sweden (Swedish Ethical Review Authority Dnr 2021-06656-01 / Date ethical approval: 20 January 2022).

Upon securing ethical approval, we pilot-tested the interview guide and made necessary adjustments. Data collectors were trained in qualitative research methods and participated in one training workshop to ensure consistency across countries during data collection. In each country, different data collector conducted the interviews (Belgium, [BD, male PhD researcher], Finland [no co-authors of this study, one postdoctoral researcher and one research assistant], Spain [no co-authors of this study, two female PhD researchers], Sweden [PA, female postdoctoral researcher]).

In three of the four countries, data collectors made use of convenience sampling at neighborhood organizations and organized project-information sessions at these

neighborhood organizations to engage potential participants. In Finland, gatekeepers facilitated direct introductions. Data collectors then contacted potential participants by phone or in person to explain the project's objectives and invite them to participate. Interviews were scheduled at locations chosen by the participants, typically their homes, neighborhood organizations, or cafés. To expand the participant pool, we employed snowball and location-based convenience sampling techniques elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Before the interviews, all participants read and signed an informed consent document. The average interview duration was 86 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews were conducted in the official language(s) of each country: French (n=9) and Dutch (n=6) in Belgium, Finnish (n=12) and Swedish (n=3) in Finland, Spanish (n=9) and Catalan (n=6) in Spain, and Swedish (n=15) in Sweden. Transcription occurred concurrently with data generation but varied across countries. Some data collectors transcribed interviews directly, while others collaborated with professional transcribers. During the analytical process, excerpts of the transcripts were fully pseudonymized and provided to the main author. In the results section, participants are identified by interview code, gender, age, and years of residence in the neighborhood (e.g., BE_01, Man, 78, 14).

Analytical process

The analytical process is described below and consisted of three parts: 1) the data collectors pre-coded the data during data collection, 2) the authors extracted relevant data for this study's purpose per country according to the main author's instructions, and 3) the main author analyzed the data in depth.

Pre-coding

Given the extensive data collection across four countries, maintaining consistency in data analysis was crucial. To ensure quality control, we implemented several routines, including weekly team meetings to standardize interview techniques and interpretation of responses.

Additionally, we collaboratively developed a standardized database for pre-coding. Using "displays of data" (Creswell, 1998), we organized the multilingual data, while remaining sensitive to the diverse country contexts, ensuring consistency while capturing nuanced differences across settings.

Pre-coding was conducted in two distinct phases over two years. In the first phase, data collectors listened to the interview recordings and independently pre-coded preliminary themes in the database. Responses were logged vertically by component, with a binary system (1 or 0) indicating whether a particular theme was mentioned in each interview. This system allowed us to systematically identify recurring themes in each interview.

As new themes emerged, the database expanded inductively. When all data had been pre-coded, we used a roadmap that relied on questions and answers to facilitate country-specific efforts to make sure that the data had been pre-coded similarly. Thus, in a later stage, we used a deductively designed roadmap to double-check the reliability of the pre-coding we had done. Weekly meetings created, therefore, not only an audit trail for the project and helped us to synchronize sense-making efforts, but also helped us ensure consistency and alignment among coders.

The database proved also invaluable for identifying relevant categories for subsequent data analysis and breaking down the data into smaller units for examination. Thus, we also used it to request the data extracts that deserved in-depth analysis from each of the countries' data coders. The in-depth analysis upon which this study relies was done by the main author. Thus, following Denscombe's (2017) content analysis framework, this data pre-coding step enabled us to uncover the range of manifest content present in each category.

Data extraction by all authors

At the start of the analysis, authors in each country (BD, EH, MC, PA, RS) extracted information relevant to the aim of this study from the pre-coding process. We revisited themes in the Excel sheet related to environmental features, such as "neighborhood attachment", "environment-related issues", or "topics related to the sample participants belong to (i.e., living in a

disadvantaged urban area)". Authors were instructed to return to interviews in which a '1' was marked for these themes, to re-read the interview to make sure all relevant data was included, and to extract relevant, contextualized, and pseudonymized excerpts. They sent these excerpts to the main author, who followed the same procedure for his own country (i.e., Belgium). To ensure consistency, the main author developed a paper-specific roadmap guiding co-authors in reviewing their pre-coded data and selecting excerpts for submission.

In-depth analysis

During the in-depth analysis, the main author individually re-coded the data, inductively developing themes by exploring 1) how participants thought the neighborhood environment shaped their civic engagement and 2) how participants felt that their civic engagement had contributed to changes in their neighborhood environment.

We employed a thematic analysis approach inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2024) Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). The data utilized in this study has been analyzed in a tradition that acknowledges the epistemological reality that is unavoidable when collecting, managing, and analyzing qualitative data, namely that researchers are bound to impact, through, for example, their choices of entry points of analysis, the data that they have collected. Hence, this study's allusions throughout the text to data being generated while being analyzed. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2024) six-phase framework: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Data was managed using MAXQDA (Version 24.3.0).

This study focused on person-place relations, examining participants' lived experiences and meaning-making around civic engagement. Discussions with co-authors ensured themes remained rooted in participants' narratives. The results are supported by illustrative excerpts showing how individual experiences are shaped by broader socio-economic and environmental dynamics in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Results

The results section examines how older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods experience their civic engagement in their neighborhood environment. This is done by examining three generated themes: 1) the relevance of meaningful neighborhood interactions, 2) the dual role of the socio-economic context, and 3) the importance of the socio-physical environment.

1. The relevance of meaningful neighborhood interactions

This theme explores how meaningful neighborhood interactions shape participants' civic engagement. It examines how participants reflected on their neighborhoods in the past compared to the present, how they felt the presence or absence of meaningful interactions shaped their engagement, and how they talked about how their civic engagement reshaped neighborhood interactions.

Long-term residents (25+ years) frequently reminisced about past neighborhood cohesion and its role in fostering civic engagement. Their reflections often contrasted with their perceptions of current neighborhood dynamics. Because the interviews conducted relied on a life-course approach, some of the participants described how past opportunities for neighborhood interactions were closely tied to civic engagement. Many recalled an era when informal help among neighbors was commonplace. For instance, one participant reflected:

"We were all like a family, we went into anyone's house. (…) My mother had the keys to four neighbors in the building. (…). She went to help, or she visited two older women to keep them company. Everything has always been very familiar" (ES_11, Man, 70,70)

Other examples of civic engagement through the life course included various forms of informal help, such as looking after each other's children or running errands, as well as more formal activities like volunteering and political activities. Participants recalled organizing neighborhood watches, organizing a local festival, or voting for the first time.

Participants also described how current neighborhood interactions shaped, and often limited, their civic engagement. Some wished to engage more, but alluded to how weak connections with neighbors made it difficult to sustain involvement. As a result, some saw the neighborhood as an inhibiting environment with insufficient social networks for new civic initiatives. One participant, reflecting on her associational membership, noted that limited engagement options stemmed from weak neighbor interactions and a lack of willingness for collective action:

"*Here, terribly many activities have stopped. Not because of the area per se, but the passivity of the people. I am absolutely convinced that the people we have in this area are inactive*" (FI_04, Woman, 74, 31)

In contrast, participants also shared experiences of meaningful neighborhood interactions that motivated civic engagement. Both long-term residents and those who were relatively new to the neighborhood described how everyday interactions, such as meeting neighbors in the street, in their apartment building, or at neighborhood organizations, helped foster their engagement. One participant recounted how a casual connection led her to start volunteering at a neighborhood organization:

"*I knew a woman who did not live far from me and who worked as a volunteer here (i.e., the neighborhood organization). Once, I accompanied her, (...) and, every now and then, I would come over. (…) One day, the organization's cook called me, asking if I would be interested in volunteering here. (…) That is how I started*" (BE_10, Woman, 71, 52)

Beyond volunteering, some neighborhood interactions evolved into reciprocal informal help between neighbors, reinforcing the idea that civic engagement not only responds to the neighborhood environment but actively reshapes it too (cf. Hand, Laliberte, Huot et al., 2020). Worth mentioning is also that some participants highlighted how they had changed their neighborhoods by supporting others. Many stories revolved around informal help, illustrating how acts of kindness between neighbors strengthened community ties. One participant described how assisting her neighbor led to a reciprocal helping relationship:

"There is a neighbor who lives below us (participant and participant's husband). (…) He has needed help with a lot. (…) I have authorization, so I can collect his medicines for him. Then he had to renovate certain things, and he could not handle everything, so we helped him put in a floor in the kitchen, for example, and the hall. And tear things down. (…) And afterward, he has helped us when we have been away, watering flowers and things like that" (SE_03, Woman, 70, 48)

These excerpts suggest that meaningful neighborhood interactions are crucial for fostering civic engagement. However, perspectives differed on whether the neighborhood remains a space that facilitates such engagement. Many participants spoke nostalgically about the past, recalling interactions with neighbors that encouraged informal help. Today, the ability to engage civically appears to depend on one's capacity to maintain and build meaningful neighborhood interactions over time. Furthermore, reciprocal acts of informal help can strengthen social bonds, illustrating how small everyday interactions contribute to a more connected neighborhood.

2. The dual role of the socio-economic context

A second theme addresses the dual role of the socio-economic context in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Participants discussed how the socio-economic neighborhood context either enabled or inhibited their civic engagement, with differing opinions based on individual experiences. Additionally, participants mentioned how their engagement helped them manage the adversity associated with their neighborhoods.

Participants described the socio-economic context of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods as a push factor, motivating them to engage civically. This context was sometimes described as being the catalyst to their civic engagement since involvement in the community where one lives was deemed to be important. Thus, while some acknowledged their neighborhood's socio-economic problems, they highlighted the value of participating actively in them. Some participants viewed the socio-economic context as an internal motivator, not to leave, but to work hard for neighborhood improvement. One participant, active as a volunteer in the local church congregation, shared:

"You notice what a neighborhood it is, with many challenges, a lot of deprivation. There is work to be done here, and that encourages you to make an extra effort. (…) if I had lived in a wealthier municipality, there would have been fewer challenges there" (BE_08, Woman, 74, 30)

Additionally, participants discussed how the socio-economic realities of their neighborhoods helped to foster a collective civic spirit since there were enough opportunities for community organizing to address the challenges that their neighborhoods face. Thus, besides the informal help that some offered their neighborhoods, there were also allusions to informal forms of political and civil disobedience, by, for example, suggesting that occupying buildings could be a reasonable way of addressing some of the problems. One participant reflected:

"This is a working-class neighborhood. (…) Many arrived from outside the neighborhood (…) and logically need a lot of help. This is what it did to us: There was a movement in the neighborhood, we started to occupy buildings, (and) help those who had less. (…) Solidarity, that is what has moved us" (ES_10; Man, 78, 56)

Participants pointed to features of the socio-economic realities that their neighborhoods are characterized by that made civic engagement more challenging. For example, they referred to issues such as public insecurity, crime, and a general lack of respect for the neighborhood's physical environment. These factors made it more difficult to go out and engage, particularly at night. For some participants, crime and a sense that their neighborhoods were unsafe directly hindered their civic engagement, especially when neighborhood organizations were located farther from their homes, where they volunteered or participated in activities. In other cases, participants found alternatives that enabled them to continue their civic engagement. One participant described how she deals with threatening public spaces by mentioning that she participates in activities offered by an association outside her neighborhood and takes a taxi to and from the subway:

"*Yes, I paid money for a taxi. Just because… And I am not going straight here, I am taking a detour, just to avoid passing there. Not just at night, but also during the day, many feel*

threatened when they walk in the square. (…) So far, I have taken taxis several times" (SE_08, Woman, 78, 3)

Participants also discussed how their civic engagement allowed them to address what they perceived as adverse changes in the physical environment, thus reshaping the neighborhood environment for the better. Through collective action, participants described stopping projects such as a paddling course near their homes, preventing the demolition of a neighborhood monument, protesting against police aggression, or volunteering at a soup kitchen. These actions reflect community resilience (Wild, Wiles, & Allen, 2013). One participant offers an interesting example of collective action through an informal political protest advocating for the continuation of a local secondary school's construction, which had been abruptly halted:

"*We moved here (i.e., the neighborhood's district) when the children were still young. My daughter started elementary school here, but then (…) the construction of a secondary school was suddenly halted. We, the parents, were worried that our children had to go to the city (to get their education). We organized a group of parents of my daughter's class to push the issue. (…) At that time, a few parents worked hard to pressure the school's council, the chairmen of other council groups, and the city. We finally achieved that the secondary school was built in [the district]*" (FI_02, Woman, 79, 34)

Overall, the participants' stories suggest that the socio-economic realities that characterize some disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can both hinder and motivate civic engagement. In several cases, participants spoke about how specific civic engagement actions helped halt adverse neighborhood changes, demonstrating how they were able to collectively organize around neighborhood issues and reshape their environment to meet their needs while doing so.

3. The importance of the socio-physical environment

A third theme focuses on the socio-physical environment, emphasizing the importance of nearby places for engagement. Neighborhood organizations played a key role in participants'

civic engagement, and participants also discussed how they felt their civic engagement reshaped the socio-physical environment.

Having options in one's vicinity was viewed as a crucial factor for civic engagement. Some participants found it easier to engage civically when activities were located close to their homes and easily accessible. In general, participants mentioned that opportunities for engagement were mostly nearby, and they took advantage of these opportunities. For instance, when it came to voting, participants emphasized the importance of having polling stations nearby, which made it easier for them to go out and vote, as demonstrated in this quote:

"*Here, you can vote in many places. Yes, you can easily vote here (i.e., the neighborhood's district) and the polling places are at least as good as any other polling place*" (FI_07, Man, 76, 28)

Participants often discussed the role of neighborhood organizations in shaping their civic engagement. These organizations, which foster social interactions, can be seen as part of the socio-physical environment (Wahl & Gitlin, 2019). They may serve as spaces where politically like-minded people gather to discuss the neighborhood's future or as representative bodies for specific groups, such as tenants or older adults. These organizations also often serve a more socially oriented role, where people can come together, engage in social activities, or participate in events. One participant discusses her involvement in such an organization and how it serves an important role in the neighborhood's socio-physical environment:

"I am a restless person. I have to fill the hours, and here (i.e., the organization), the hours are not filled by me being at the bar, playing cards, but in something beneficial, for yourself and the neighborhood, knowing all the activities that can be done" (ES_03, Woman, 71, 42)

Participants emphasized that neighborhood organizations also serve as places where individuals can contribute to their community or the broader neighborhood environment. For example, formal volunteering in these organizations allowed participants to shape their neighborhood environment. One participant gives some insight into her voluntary work in a Church-based organization in the neighborhood:

"Since last autumn we have been involved in a thing we call "the (name of the district) living room". Everybody can go there to drink coffee or eat a little sandwich, with a low threshold. We are trying to bring people together, such as people who are lonely" (FI_09, Woman, 70, 0)

Through this participant's active engagement in the neighborhood organization, she created a space for others to come together. In doing so, she actively used one feature of the socio-physical neighborhood environment (i.e., the neighborhood organization) to reshape and strengthen the social fiber of the neighborhood and create a space where neighbors can connect.

Finally, there were instances of participants demonstrating agency and making changes in the physical environment outside of neighborhood organizations. This included the creation of new playgrounds or the improvement of plastic bins in public parks. In one example of digital civic engagement, a participant was able to report issues in the physical environment directly to the municipality, illustrating how digital infrastructure can support civic engagement. He explains:

"There is an app in (name of municipality) where you can report issues. I saw a water drainage pump with its door broken. So, I reported it" (SE_12, Man, 65, 38)

Another participant demonstrated agency through informal political participation, directly contacting his municipality to address the noise that young people in the neighborhood were making. He describes how he took action:

"From 8 to 9 p.m., there are young people here with mopeds making a lot of noise until two o'clock at night. Even the children cannot sleep. (…) I contacted the municipality, (and) after a while, you get to know these people. (…) I have the impression that it is getting better now. I gave them the license plates of the motorcycles myself. They ride here day and night, (sometimes even) with cars. They can reach high speeds here" (BE_12, Man, 84, 58)

In sum, participants identified features of the socio-physical environment as key to their civic engagement. They emphasized the role of neighborhood organizations in fostering networks,

engaging in activities, and volunteering. Proximity made engagement easier. Their involvement, through associational membership, digital engagement, and informal political action, reflects the multidimensional nature of civic engagement (Serrat, 2025). Lastly, participants alluded to how they changed aspects of the socio-physical neighborhood environment.

Discussion

In this study, we have aimed to advance the knowledge on the relationship between civic engagement in later life and the disadvantaged urban neighborhood environment. Participants described how neighborhood features either facilitated or hindered their engagement and how they, in turn, shaped their neighborhoods. Three key take-aways are discussed: 1) the relationship between older adults and their neighborhoods is bi-directional, 2) disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can be catalysts for civic engagement through the life course, and 3) neighborhood organizations can facilitate civic engagement in later life.

Older adults' relation to their neighborhoods is bi-directional and shaped through the life course

The participants described how they wanted to change their neighborhoods, suggesting older adults' agency. Their agency was made visible though the diverse forms of civic engagement they engaged in, and their stories about making changes in their neighborhoods, even though the neighborhood environment might at times hinder their engagement. This aligns with contemporary perspectives on the bi-directional approach, which is often also called transactional, towards person-place relations (Hand, Laliberte, & Huot, 2020; Oswald, Wahl, Wanka, & Chaudhury, 2024). This paradigm opens new pathways for exploring older adults' agency, through looking at reciprocal relations with others or their neighborhood environment (e.g. Dury, Brosens, Honghui et al., 2023). Moreover, the results of this study suggest that these bi-directional person-place interactions change during one's life, and parts of the results section allude to how civic engagement in later life and the disadvantaged urban neighborhood environment mutually shape each other during the life course. For instance, participants noted how their neighborhoods had changed, influencing their social networks and opportunities for

civic engagement. In the literature, this dynamic process is referred to as "the life course of place" (Lekkas, Paquet, Howard, & Daniel, 2017), which enables the exploration of new possible future research avenues for those interested in how persons and their environments co-evolve.

Disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can be catalysts for civic engagement

The study results show how disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can be catalysts for civic engagement. Prior research on civic engagement in later life within disadvantaged urban neighborhoods often focuses on structural challenges, typically framed in terms of deficiencies, such as a lack of community groups, inadequate public transportation, or neighborhood unsafety, that reduce participation in civic activities (e.g., Grinshteyn & Sugar, 2021). Our results reveal indeed that concerns about safety and fear of going out alone have deterred some participants from engaging civically. Nevertheless, this is a one-way perspective. Research suggests that civic engagement can enhance older adults' feelings of safety in their neighborhoods as well (De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2012). In this way, civic engagement may serve as a means for participants to change their neighborhoods for the better. In our interviews, the socio-economic realities of the neighborhoods they lived in motivated participants to engage and to overcome the barriers the neighborhood poses throughout their lives. Living in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood appears to be a catalyst for a wide range of civic activities that spans participants' lives, including political engagement, such as voting (Burden & Wichowsky, 2014), and volunteering (Lim & Laurence, 2015), and participants' narratives suggest that older adults who live in that type of neighborhood can be just as altruistic, engaged, and activist, as those in more affluent areas (Cheung & Mui, 2023; Wanka 2018) or their younger counterparts (Ward, McBride, Bynner, & Corbett, 2024).

Neighborhood organizations can facilitate civic engagement in later life

This study suggests that features of the socio-physical environment, and particularly neighborhood organizations, play a transformative role within person-place relations in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, while sometimes facilitating older adults' civic engagement. This finding aligns with other studies that highlight cases where individuals

overcome the challenges to civic engagement that are particular to disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, such as decreased social networks, unsafety and material deprivation (e.g., Bezzo & Jeannet, 2023), through engaging in neighborhood organizations. Participants' narratives seem to suggest that the presence of opportunities for engagement within the immediate environment is important.

However, proximity is not the only factor that influences the propensity for civic engagement. Participants also described the significance of engaging in meaningful activities and fostering bonds with others. The neighborhood organizations were mentioned as places for social interaction as they play a significant role in bringing neighbors together. Neighborhood organizations can be regarded as exemplars of the concept of 'third places,' as previously defined in extant literature (Finlay, Esposito, Kim et al., 2019; Finlay, Cannon, Metzer, & Yeh, 2024). These third places are distinct form the conventional 'first and second places,' namely the home and the workplace, respectively. The significance of these 'third places' lies in their potential to serve as community building purposes (such as gathering with friends and bonding activities) and cannot be disregarded. As such, the results suggest that these neighborhood organizations can foster the civic engagement of older adults who are present at these venues.

Strengths and limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the sample was purposively selected, and access to participants relied on gatekeepers, typically neighborhood organizations. This may have led to the recruitment of older adults who are more engaged in their communities, meaning their views and perspectives may not be representative of those who are not involved in such organizations. Second, although data were collected in four countries, the study does not provide a cross-national comparative analysis of the results. Such an analysis could offer valuable insights into how national contexts shape older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, an important strength of this paper lies in its multidimensional approach, focusing on formal volunteering, associational membership, formal and informal political engagement, informal help, and digital civic engagement, which captures both

institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of civic engagement in later life (Serrat, Scharf, Villar et al., 2020). As such, this study hopes to have inspired other researchers to see older adults' civic engagement as a broad category that can manifest itself in many different forms.

References

Bezzo, F.B., & Jeannet, A.M. (2023). Civic involvement in deprived communities: A longitudinal study of England. *British Journal of Sociology*, 74(5), 837–857. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13024

Braun V., & Clarke V. (2024). Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: A review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). *Palliative Medicine*, 38(6), 608-616. https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163241234800

Buffel, T., Doran, P., & Yarker, S. (2024). *Reimagining age-friendly communities*. Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447368571

Buffel, T., & Phillipson, C. (2023) *Ageing in Place in Urban Environments: Critical Perspectives*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003229322

Buffel, T., Yarker, S., Phillipson, C., Lang, L., Lewis, C., Doran, P., & Mhorag, G. (2023). Locked down by inequality: Older people and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Urban Studies*, 60(8), 1465-1482. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980211041018

Burden, B.C., & Wichowsky, A. (2014). Economic discontent as a mobilizer. *The Journal of Politics*., 76(4), 887–898. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381614000437

Cheung, E.S.L., & Mui, A.C. (2023). Home and neighborhood environmental correlates of civic participation among community-dwelling older adults in Canada. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment,* 38(4), 2687–2705. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-023-10057-7

Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Dean, J. (2022). Informal volunteering, inequality, and illegitimacy. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 51(3), 527-544. https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211034580

De Donder, L., De Witte, N., Buffel, T., Dury, S., & Verté, D. (2012). Social capital and feelings of unsafety in later life: A study on the influence of social networks, place attachment, and civic participation on perceived safety in Belgium. *Research on Aging*, 34(4), 425-448. https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027511433879

Denscombe, M. (2017). *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects (3rd ed.)*. Open University Press.

Dikmans, B., & Chacur, K. (2024). Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for ageing and childhood research. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking Ages: A Dialogue between Childhood and Ageing Research*. London: Routledge Advances in Sociology (pp. 49-65).

Domènech-Abella, J., Mundó, J., Leonardi, M., Chatterji, S., Tobiasz-Adamczyk, B., Koskinen, S., Ayuso-Mateos, J.L., Haro, J.M., & Olaya, B. (2020). Loneliness and depression among older European adults: The role of perceived neighborhood built environment. *Health & Place*, 62, 102280. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102280

Duppen, D., Van der Elst, M.C.J., Dury, S., Lambotte, D.F. & De Donder, L. (2019). The social environment's relationship with frailty: Evidence from existing studies. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 38(1), 3-26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464816688310

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Smetcoren, A.-S., Van Regenmortel, S. De Witte, N., De Donder, L., & Verté, D. (2020). Pathways to late-life volunteering: A focus on social connectedness. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 49(3): 523-547. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019881509

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Honghui, P., Principi, A., Smetcoren, A.-S., Perek-Białas, J., De Donder, L. (2023). Helping behavior of older adults during the early COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium. *Research on Aging*, 45(1): 8-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221105231

Dury, S., Willems, J., De Witte, N., De Donder, L., Buffel, T., & Verté, D. (2016). Municipality and neighborhood influences on volunteering in later life. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 35(6), 601-626. https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464814533818

Farrer, J. (2023). Urban foodways and social sustainability: neighborhood restaurants and social infrastructure. *Food, Culture & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2023.2262191

Finlay, J., Esposito, M., Kim, M.H., Gomez-Lopez, I., & Clarke, P. (2019). Closure of 'third places'? Exploring potential consequences for collective health and wellbeing. *Health & Place*, 60, 102225. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102225

Finlay, J., Cannon, M., Meltzer, G.., & Yeh, J. (2024). Aging in third places. In M.P. Cutchin, & G.D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and place* (pp. 221-240). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802209983

Genge, C., McNeil, H., Debergue, P., & Freeman, S. (2023). Technology to support aging in place: Key messages for policymakers and funders. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1287486

Granbom, M., Jönson, H., & Kottorp, A. (2022). Older adults living in disadvantaged areas: Protocol for a mixed methods baseline study on homes, quality of life, and participation in transitioning neighborhoods. *JMIR Research Protocols*, 11(10): e41255. https://doi.org/10.2196/41255

Grinshteyn, E.G., & Sugar, J.A. (2021). Perceived neighbourhood safety and volunteerism among older adults. *Ageing & Society*, 41: 2914-2932. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20000677

Hand, C., Laliberte, D.R., Huot, S., Pack, R., & Gilliland, J. (2020). Enacting agency: Exploring how older adults shape their neighbourhoods. *Ageing & Society*, 40(3), 565–583. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X18001150

Lekkas, P., Paquet, C., Howard, N.J., & Daniel, M. (2017). Illuminating the lifecourse of place in the longitudinal study of neighbourhoods and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 177, 239-47. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.09.025

Lim, C., & Laurence, J. (2015). Doing good when times are bad: Volunteering behaviour in economic hard times. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 66(2): 319-344. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12122

Mahmood, A., Seetharaman, K., Jenkins, H.-T., & Chaudhury, H. (2022). Contextualizing innovative housing models and services within the Age-Friendly Communities Framework. *The Gerontologist*, 62(1), 66-74. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnab115

Martinez, I.L., Crooks, D., Kim, K.S., & Tanner, E. (2011). Invisible civic engagement among older adults: Valuing the contributions of informal volunteering. *The Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 26(1), 23-37. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-011-9137-y

Milton, S., Pliakas, T., Hawkesworth, S., Nanchahal, K., Grundy, C., Amuzu, A., & Lock, K. (2015). A qualitative geographical information systems approach to explore how older people over 70 years interact with and define their neighbourhood environment. *Health & Place*, 36, 127–133. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2015.10.002

OECD (2021*) Health at a Glance 2021*: OECD Indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Oswald, F., Wahl, H.-W., Wanka, A., & Chaudhury, H. (2024). Theorizing place and aging: Enduring and novel issues in environmental gerontology. In M. P. Cutchin & G. D.

Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 37-60). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802209983

Parekh, R., Maleku, A., Fields, N., Adorno, G., Schuman, D., & Felderhoff, B. (2018). Pathways to age-friendly communities in diverse urban neighborhoods: Do social capital and social cohesion matter?. *The Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 61(5), 492-512. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2018.1454564

Prattley, J., Buffel, T., Marshall, A., & Nazroo, J. (2020). Area effects on the level and development of social exclusion in later life. *Social Science & Medicine*, 246: 112722. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112722

Scharf, T., Philipson, C., & Smith, A.E. (2005). Social exclusion of older people in deprived urban communities of England. *European Journal of Ageing*, 2, 76-87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-005-0025-6

Seifert, A., Rössel, J. (2021). Digital participation. In D. Gu & M.E. Dupre (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Gerontology and Population Aging* (pp. 1446-1450). Springer International. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22009-9

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., Villar, F., & Gómez, C. (2020). Fifty-five years of research into older people's civic participation: Recent trends, future directions. *The Gerontologist*, 60(1): e38-e51. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz021

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., & Villar, F. (2022). Mapping civic engagement in later life: A scoping review of gerontological definitions and a typology proposal. Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 33(3), 615–626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00346-6

Serrat, R. (2025). *Civic engagement in Later life*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Serrat, R. (2025). A Conceptual Framework to Understand Civic Engagement in Later Life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 3-19). Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Söderström, J. (2020). Life diagrams: A methodological and analytical tool for accessing life histories. *Qualitative Research*, 20(1), 3-21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118819068

Stoecker, R., & Witkovsky B. (2023). Elder civic engagement and rural community development. *Ageing International*, 48(2), 526-546. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-022-09488-4

Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J.W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *The European Political Science Review*, 10(1), 139-163. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230

Tonkens, E., & Verhoeven, I. (2019). The civic support paradox: Fighting unequal participation in deprived neighbourhoods. *Urban Studies*, 56(8), 1595-1610. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018761536

Uitermark, J. (2015). Longing for Wikitopia: The study and politics of self-organisation. *Urban Studies*, 52(13), 2301–2312. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015577334

UN Habitat. (2022). *World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

Wahl, H.-W., & Gitlin, L.N. (2019). Linking the socio-physical environment to successful aging. In R. Fernández-Ballesteros, A. Benetos & J.-M. Robine (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Successful Aging* (pp. 570-593). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316677018

Wanka, A. (2018). Disengagement as withdrawal from public space: rethinking the relation between place attachment, place appropriation, and identity-building among older adults. *The Gerontologist*, 58(1), 130-139. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx081

Ward, S., McBride, M., Bynner, C., Corbett, I. (2024). Building recognition, redistribution, and representation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods: Exploring the potential of youth activism in Scotland. *Social Inclusion*, 12, 8476. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i405

Wild, K., Wiles, J.L., & Allen, R.E.S. (2013). Resilience: Thoughts on the value of the concept for critical gerontology. *Ageing & Society*, 33, 137-158. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X11001073

World Health Organization. (2017). *Age-friendly Environments in Europe: A Handbook of Domains in Policy Action*. Geneva: World Health Organization - Regional Office for Europe.

Chapter 5:
A plurality of place:
Towards a more inclusive understanding of older migrants' civic engagement

Under review:

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., Serrat, R., Berdai Chaouni, S., & De Donder, L. (under review). A plurality of place: Towards a more inclusive understanding of older migrants' civic engagement (under review in *Well-being, Space and Society*).

Chapter 5:

A plurality of place:
Towards a more inclusive understanding of older migrants' civic engagement

Abstract

Discussions about aging in place and civic engagement often revolve around neighborhoods and local communities. However, for older migrants, this perspective might be restrictive, as they often maintain more mobile and transnational lifestyles. A broader conceptualization of place may therefore be needed to explore their civic engagement. This study focuses on the civic engagement of older migrants and the places in which this engagement occurs throughout their lives. It draws on eight life-story interviews (four men and four women) with older adults (minimum age: 60) born in non-European countries who arrived in Belgium in adulthood. Through reflexive thematic analysis, research questions address what the places are that the participants identify as meaningful for their civic engagement throughout their lives, and how they describe these places in relation to their civic engagement. Participants engaged civically across a wide range of places, including the home or household, the workplace, neighborhood associations, and digital or transnational places. These may be reciprocal places of mutual support or collective places fostering togetherness and social change. Furthermore, they can provide supportive contexts for civic engagement, but may also be sites of friction or tension. This suggests that places are differentially experienced in relation to civic engagement in later life. The discussion highlights participants' plural understandings of place and the need to value this plurality when studying how places support or curtail older migrants' civic engagement. The study also calls for a broader definition of civic engagement to foster more inclusive research, policy, and practice.

Introduction

While older migrants contribute in various ways to the societies in which they live (El-Kayed, 2024; Zickgraf, 2017), their civic engagement remains underexplored and underrecognized in academic research (Torres & Serrat, 2019). Various reasons for this omission have been proposed, including conceptual disagreements regarding the definition of civic engagement, and the dominance of empirical studies that center primarily around older, white, and mostly American, populations. Moreover, these studies often fail to consider the cultural, socio-political and migratory contexts that influence how older migrants engage in civic life (Reyes, 2024; Reyes & Serrat, 2025).

Furthermore, gerontological literature that does address the contextual dimensions of civic engagement in later life often limits its focus to smaller micro-level geographical units, such as neighborhoods where people live and local communities (e.g., Dury et al., 2023; Hand et al., 2020). Such an approach risks overlooking the lived realities of older migrants, who often maintain transnational connections and lifestyles, and experience frequent mobility within areas or across borders, whether by choice or necessity (Ho et al., 2024; Palladino, 2019). Consequently, broader spatial considerations, including digital or transnational places, remain significantly underexamined in relation to older migrants' civic engagement (Ho et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2020).

Given the limited understanding of how older migrants give meaning to civic engagement within these plural spatial contexts (Reyes, 2024; Thakurta, 2025), this study examines the everyday places (both physical and digital) that older migrants themselves identify as meaningful arenas for civic activity. By doing so, it aims to broaden conceptualizations of civic engagement in later life and contribute to more inclusive gerontological scholarship.

Towards a more inclusive understanding of civic engagement

While civic engagement is commonly associated with formal social and political activities, such as volunteering or voting, these dominant frameworks are often not "migrancy-astute" (Ågård & Torres, 2025), which means that they are grounded in normative assumptions about

why older migrants do or do not civically engage and therefore might not align with their lived realities. These traditional civic engagement frameworks have prioritized engagement in formal contexts and neglect how structural forms of exclusion based on migration status, race, gender or socio-economic position can restrict access to such places (Reyes, 2024; Serrat et al., 2022). This narrow focus on institutionalized civic engagement renders the civic actions of older migrants invisible or mischaracterized as dis-engagement, while several studies have demonstrated that historical inequality has adversely impacted the formal volunteering of people of color and migrant communities (Robinson, 2019; Rusoja, 2024). In response, many communities create parallel spheres in which civic engagement occurs, through alternative institutional forms and informal or community-based initiatives that function not only as compensatory mechanisms, but also as deliberate strategies of resistance to exclusionary forces (Grayman-Simpson, 2012; Rusoja, 2024).

Furthermore, leaving one's country of birth to relocate to another country is a significant life event (Channoufi, 2025). In the process of establishing a new life in their host countries, older migrants build both connections in their physical surroundings, while also staying virtually connected with family and friends in their countries of birth. Moreover, increased digitalization has intensified older migrants' transnational networks (Ho et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these networks are rarely explored through the lens of civic engagement in later life. Instead, transnational ties are often viewed as a routine aspect of migrants' lives (e.g., Kemppainen, 2024), rather than recognized as meaningful forms of civic contribution, which has led to a paucity of research on the civic engagement of older migrants across these transnational spheres. Failure to investigate these forms of civic engagement may result in the obscuring of these societal contributions (Torres & Serrat, 2019). As such, the contributions of older migrants to their communities, particularly in informal, digital, and transnational contexts, remain underrecognized in much of the civic engagement literature.

To capture these often-overlooked contributions, we adopt a multidimensional framework of civic engagement that includes not only formal, institutionalized, and political acts, but also informal, care-based, and digital practices (Reuter & Scharf, 2025). This approach allows for a more inclusive understanding of how older migrants engage with their surroundings, which is

not only brought about through institutions, but also through everyday practices of care and connection, both within and across borders (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Robinson, 2019).

Places of engagement

Although civic engagement in later life is often studied in terms of individual characteristics or personal benefits (e.g., well-being, social inclusion), its spatial dimensions have received less attention (Cheung & Mui, 2023). Yet, older adults' relationships with the places that surround them, including homes, neighborhoods, municipal or transnational places, play a key role in shaping their engagement. This spatial lens becomes particularly important when considering older migrants, whose life courses often unfold across multiple geographic, cultural, and digital contexts (Au et al., 2024). In addition, researchers have raised the need for further studies on the diverse experiences of aging migrants related to the places in which they grow old (Oliver et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2021).

Place in this study is conceptualized as a relationally produced context (Yarker et al., 2024), in which civic practices are embedded and negotiated. Our definition of place includes physical places where people meet and come together, such as neighborhoods, urban areas, cities, or homes, workplaces or school environments (Andrews, 2024), and digital places, which are generally considered as online spheres where two or more persons interact with one another to a certain extent (e.g., an Instagram livestream or a virtual gaming world). This stands in contrast to digital *spaces* that are "static destinations of asynchronous communication (e.g., a blog or website)" (Korpi, 2023, p.1).

Additionally, places do not remain static over time. The meanings attributed to them can shift following socio-political changes (Walsh, 2024). Ryan et al. (2021) posit that socio-political events do not necessarily impact older migrants directly. Rather, they argue that increasingly stringent immigration laws and regimes, or a growing antimigrant sentiment, can profoundly change how places are experienced and inhabited. This phenomenon reveals how older migrants' feelings of attachment to place are complex and, some authors would argue, never completely achieved in later life (Palladino, 2019), which underscores the necessity of employing a life-course lens to understand this process.

While the spatial dimensions of older migrants' lives have been addressed in relation to transnational networks and caregiving (e.g., Heikkinen and Lumme-Sandt, 2023; Kemppainen, 2025; De Silva, 2017; Zickgraf, 2017) and more recently through studies of associational and political involvement at the neighborhood level (e.g., Klaver et al., 2025; Van der Greft 2024), there remains little work that systematically explores how diverse forms of civic engagement are experienced across multiple, overlapping place-based contexts.

Research questions

In this study, we examine how older migrants narrate about the physical and virtual places they consider meaningful for their civic engagement throughout their lives. As such, we aim to better understand how various places might support older migrants to civically engage in daily life and to pursue civic activities. Anchoring our analysis in a life-course perspective allows us to situate older migrants' civic engagement within the broader context of their life trajectories, which are shaped by temporality and migration histories (Reyes, 2022). The analysis is guided by two research questions: 1) **Which physical and virtual places do older migrants identify as meaningful for their civic engagement?** and 2) **How do older migrants describe these places in relation to their civic engagement?**.

Methods

Research design

This study was conducted as part of the European research project 'CIVEX: Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Determinants, experiences, and policy implications', funded by the Joint Programme Initiative (JPI) More Years Better Lives. CIVEX is a collaboration between four European universities (Åbo Akademi University (AAU), Finland; Universitat de Barcelona (UB), Spain; Uppsala Universitet (UU), Sweden; Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium). The methodological orientation underpinning this research is life course theory. As such, life story interviews were conducted. In Belgium, 69 life-story interviews were conducted, with older adults either residing in disadvantaged urban areas,

receiving formal care at home, living in residential aged care facilities, or having a non-European migration background.

Research sample

This study makes use of eight interviews with older adults (i.e., at least 60 years old), who took part in one of the 69 interviews that were conducted in total, with a non-European migration background, who resided in Belgium at the time of the interview. These interviews were selected after a rigorous selection process. Inclusion criteria were:

- Having migrated to Belgium in adulthood (being 18 years or older upon arrival in Belgium);
- Having migrated from a non-European country to Belgium, as, in general, patterns of civic engagement are different between non-European foreign-born and native-born older adults living in Europe (Serrat et al., 2023);
- Interviews were conducted by the main author of this paper (who is a white, male PhD researcher, who is trained in qualitative research methods, and who was 30 years old and employed at the VUB when data collection took place);
- As civic engagement is gendered (Dahlberg et al., 2020), and life courses as well (Hagestad & Dykstra, 2016), we strived for an even distribution between men and women. As we had more men (n=10) than women (n=4) in our final sample, we used a citizen participation scale created by Theocharis and Van Deth (2018). This scale assessed the number of civic activities done by participants during the last 12 months. We obtained this information through a survey at the start of the interview, and we used the results to match the civic activity of four men with that of the four women already included, while accounting for the diversity of civic engagement across genders.

The final participant sample therefore included four men and four women, who were between 60 and 70 years old, and who were born in a non-European country (i.e., Democratic Republic of Congo (n=1), Ghana (n=1), Morocco (n=5), and Senegal (n=1)). Six had become Belgian citizens and two had not. Participants' age upon arrival in Belgium varied from 18 years to 51 years. Six participants migrated directly to Belgium, while two arrived through other countries.

Motives for migration varied between family- (n=4), work- (n=3) and study-related (n=1) reasons. The four women engaged in respectively 5, 9, 10 and 15 different civic activities in the last 12 months. The 4 men engaged 4, 9, 10 and 14 times. A table of participants' characteristics, with fictional names, is found in **Table 5.1.**

Table 5.1: Table of characteristics of the participants.

Fictional participant name	Age	Gender	Belgian citizenship?	Civic activities during last 12 months	Age upon arrival in Belgium	Belgium first country?	Country of birth	Reason for migration
Naoual	70	Woman	Yes	N=10	33	Yes	Morocco	Family
Ayoub	65	Man	Yes	N=14	23	No	Morocco	Work
Farida	66	Woman	Yes	N=15	18	Yes	Morocco	Family
Beatrice	70	Woman	Yes	N=9	40	Yes	Ghana	Family
Amadou	69	Man	Yes	N=4	37	Yes	Senegal	Work
Christian	69	Man	No	N=9	27	Yes	DR Congo	Study
Tarik	65	Man	Yes	N=10	22	Yes	Morocco	Work
Jasmin	60	Woman	No	N=5	51	No	Morocco	Family

Data collection procedure

For this study, ethical approval was obtained (Institutional Review Board VUB: Human Sciences Ethics Committee ECHW_324 / Date ethical approval: 8 December 2021).

Participants were recruited through employing several strategies. For the eight participants central in this study, we made use of gatekeepers who were active in socio-cultural associations and who knew the participants well, to establish first contact (n=6). Other participants were found in person through convenience sampling (i.e., being present in neighborhoods and contacting potential participants directly) (n=2). All participants were registered Belgian residents living in various urban neighborhoods in the Metropolitan area of Brussels. As such, recruitment and data collection took place in Brussels as well.

The eight interviews took place in neighborhood organizations. No third person was present during the interviews. Interviews were pilot tested and necessary adaptations were made. There

was no prior relationship between participants and the main author before the study took place. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the aims of the research and there was opportunity for researcher and participants to meet and get to know each other. The researcher's presence in the neighborhoods during the one-year data collection period also facilitated this knowledge exchange. As such, participants had the time and opportunity to ask the researcher about his personal research ambitions, interests and bias. At the start of the interview, participants filled in a written informed consent form. We also conducted a short survey, gathering personal and socio-economic data on participants' age, gender, country of birth, year of migration, whether the participants considered themselves to be an ethnic and/or racial minority, citizenship status, marital status, household composition, education background, current or latest profession, area of residence, monthly income, health status, and limitations to carry out normal everyday activities due to for instance chronic illness or disability.

Subsequently, qualitative individual interviews were conducted using an interview scheme with three key sections. First, participants shared their views on civic engagement, including their first and current experiences. The second section explored for each of five dimensions of civic engagement (associational membership, formal volunteering, non-formal and formal political engagement, digital civic engagement, and informal help) how their involvement had changed throughout their lives. To support reflection and foster dialogue, we used life diagrams, which are visual elicitation tools that can be used to make clear and discuss changes around a particular topic through time (Dikmans & Chacur, 2024; Söderström, 2020). In the third part, participants described moments when they felt included or excluded from civic life, offering detailed accounts of these experiences and their contexts. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Interviews ranged between 74 and 210 minutes, with an average of 103 minutes. Notes were taken during the interviews by the interviewer when participants did not give consent to the interviews being audio-recorded.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed ad verbatim. The main author analyzed the data by following Braun and Clarke's (2024) reflexive thematic analysis approach, using

their six-phase guidelines: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report, with the main author of this study taking the lead. Codes and themes were inductively generated that revolve around the places participants talked about in relation to their civic engagement (e.g., reciprocal places or collective places, see the results section below) and that revolve around how participants described these places (e.g., related to proximity, opportunities for meaningful and long-term civic engagement, and possibilities for community-building, but also various frictions and tensions, see the results section below). Familiarization with the data consisted of several readings of the interviews, as the collected life stories recounted the highly contextualized experiences of participants, and a thorough understanding of the nuances inherent to these stories was a prerequisite for analysis (Atkinson, 2002). Follow-up meetings were held with co-authors to discuss the analysis, and co-authors provided written and oral feedback during the analytical process. Data was managed and analyzed using MAXQDA (Version 24.3.0). To ensure full transparency, the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist was used, which outlines essential components that should be included in qualitative research reports.

Results

In the results section, we answer the two research questions of this paper, based on an analysis of the interviews of our eight participants.

Research question 1: What places do older migrants identify as meaningful for their civic engagement?

The participants mentioned a variety of places in which they civically engaged, ranging from their home environments to formal places, such as work environments, to digital places, such as social media platforms, to so-called "third places", public venues facilitating social interactions between neighbors (Finlay et al., 2024), such as neighborhood associations. Participants also referred to places beyond their immediate neighborhoods, including other urban neighborhoods, cities, and transnational contexts. Within this diversity, participants ascribed meaning to these places in different ways. We identified two main themes: reciprocal

places, where the participants not only received help, but also supported others, and collective places fostering togetherness, low-key interactions, and activities for enacting social change.

Reciprocal places: helping and being helped

First, participants described places as meaningful for their civic engagement, because they fostered reciprocal relations. These places, ranging from private and family contexts to community-based associations, enabled participants to both help and receive help from others. Reciprocity often extended beyond formal volunteering to everyday practices of reciprocal care and solidarity. Ayoub, for example, saw his home environment as central to his idea of civic engagement. He explained how he thought involvement in his family life was an important way of volunteering, through educating his children and showing a good example, by saying:

"Volunteering (takes place), first of all, in the family, you understand, because in the family, you always have to be helpful. (…) We are here to set a good example and to make room for our children. We are here to guide our children towards better values."

This quote suggests that civic engagement does not have to confined to formal places, but it can just as well be grounded in affective labor within the family sphere. Outside the family sphere, participants similarly emphasized the importance of being able to help others. Consider Amadou's quote about regularly helping an acquaintance who lives in another neighborhood in his municipality:

"(There is a) woman, and she lives in (the municipality). (…) I have already cooked for her, and taken her home. (…) I made our Senegalese dish and took it over there, which we ate. (…) If I can help, I help. That is the most important thing for me: to be able to help."

Moreover, participants referred to the places where they civically engaged as places where one not only helps others, but also receive help when the need arises. In this way, they think reciprocally about their social interactions. This reciprocity was generally not expressed in transactional terms. Participants could for instance cook (see Amadou's example) or repair

something for someone, and not expect something back from that person. Rather, they were confident that others would help them when the opportunity would arrive. Jasmin, for example, shared how, for her, reciprocity was not something concrete, but rooted in the mutual exchange of ideas and shared presence. She reflected on her engagement in an association in Brussels, which was outside of the neighborhood she lived in:

"I give and I take. (…) For example, today I am coming to eat with the people here, we start to talk. Some people give (something) to us, and I take and give back. (…) How to put it, it is about exchanging experiences, ideas."

These examples show how older migrants engage civically through relational practices of care and mutual support, which take root in both formal and private places.

Collective places: togetherness, staying informed and social change

While reciprocity emphasizes mutual exchange, participants also invoked a second, more outward-facing logic of place: collective action. Participants spoke about neighborhood associations as meaningful places for their civic engagement, as sites where opportunities arose for collective activities. They emphasized not the activities themselves, but the sense of togetherness these places fostered. This included, for example, going on trips with these associations, or partaking in collective initiatives within neighborhood settings. At times, participants were involved in groups that catered exclusively to specific social groups, such as diaspora communities or women-only associations. In this latter case, Farida explained:

"This is an association that helps women to get out of their homes, (…), for example, to do activities, to get out of the house, to do crafts, to see films, to visit museums. (…) We did a lot of things that women cannot do on their own. (So), this association, it really helped us at the beginning. (Here), people can flourish. (…) We do round tables, we have breakfasts, we cook, we do a lot of things together."

Farida's quote is exemplary to the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) to achieve things together. In addition, participants alluded to participating in low-key activities, activities that one would easily glance over, but which were nevertheless important for accruing what the

literature calls civic capital, capital that fosters cooperation and mutual support (Guiso et al., 2011). These activities revolved for instance around idea-sharing with others or engaging in small talk. Being a member of an association, for instance, did not always imply doing intensive volunteering activities. It often revolved around these smaller engagements. Tarik exemplified why these activities cannot be overlooked, giving an insight into why they are an important reason to make use of these places:

"(At this association), I come in, drink coffee, have a chat and that is it. Apart from that, there are no other associations."

(…)

Interviewer: "Yes. And why do you think that is important?"

"No, it is important. (…) It is like a smile. You give people a smile, (…), a "hello". It does something. You do not give money. A "hello" is worth more, more than the money."

Participants also discussed making use of online places, such as social media platforms to stay informed about what was happening in their neighborhood, country of citizenship or country of birth. This might stretch the imagination about what is typically considered civic engagement, but participants themselves found that this was unmistakenly a form of civic engagement. As a case in point, Beatrice related:

"On YouTube, at times, I watch what is happening in Ghana. (…) Maybe there is a famine. Last time, I heard that it rained, and it flooded, and a lot of people died. So, I just want to see how it happened."

Interviewer: "So, that is the way to keep…"

"Yeah. Informed. (…) Of what is happening."

Interviewer: "Of what is happening in Ghana. Would you say that this is typical civic engagement?"

"Yeah. (…). Yeah."

Finally, participants emphasized the significance of places as sites for enacting social change. They viewed contributing to society, albeit through small actions, as a meaningful dimension of their civic engagement. They spoke about creating change through what they considered was civic engagement across different settings: through one's professional role, as in the case of a teacher educating his students, through political activism, such as resisting gentrification, or through community-based efforts, like distributing food packages in the neighborhood.

But this desire for social change could also involve transnational activity. Christian, for example, talked about setting up a Congolese diaspora association together with others, contributing to changes across frontiers:

"We, the inhabitants of Kinshasa, we call ourselves "Kinois" ... We organized something to help the Kinois in Congo. (…) In the 1990s and 2000s, we did some voluntary work, we tried to send some clothes and stuff. We organized parcels, some second-hand clothing... (…) With the association, we sent medical supplies and all that. All for Congo."

In sum, participants described meaningful places for civic engagement as places that spurred reciprocity, where they were not only able to receive help, but also to help others. Furthermore, these places enabled collective action, through facilitating low-key encounters for exchanging ideas, but also through staying informed. Moreover, they spoke about enacting social change, in Belgium, but also transnationally.

Research question 2: How do older migrants talk about these places in relation to their civic engagement?

First, participants talked about places as a supporting context for their civic engagement. Three different socio-spatial features supported this engagement: 1) proximity, 2) opportunities for long-term meaningful engagement, including developing feelings of appreciation and gratitude through their engagement or having options for remaining active and escaping daily routines, and 3) the capacity of places to foster connections and a sense of community, in which an

important role for transforming place together is reserved. Second, their narratives also pointed to places where friction occurred, which made their civic engagement difficult. These tensions arose from the nature of the activities, broader societal dynamics, or interpersonal frictions.

A supporting context: socio-spatial features that encourage civic engagement

Although most participants were highly mobile, they often talked about proximity as a factor enabling civic engagement, with nearby opportunities seen as crucial for sustained involvement. Farida, for instance, explained that this closeness spurred her current civic engagement in a neighborhood association:

"I do not like getting stuck with something forever (…). I accepted (to be involved) here (i.e., neighborhood association), because I live right across the street. If I need to move right and left, no, I will not do it."

Farida spoke about how she does not like to "get stuck" in a certain activity, attaching importance to having the freedom of changing her involvement when she wishes it. For other participants, however, engagement was made easy because they could be involved in long-term meaningful activities. This could be in their local communities, in their neighborhoods, or even across neighborhoods. For instance, Beatrice talked about an association in Brussels that she started to engage in after her retirement:

"I have been working with (neighborhood association) ever since I started my pension, without being paid. (At one point), the employment agency told me that I could still work at (my former job), because I was still a bit strong. And I said: "No, I do not want to work for money.". I wanted to give some of my time to welfare. So, they directed me to this place."

Interviewer: "So that is what you are doing right now after you retired."

"Yes."

In addition, participants expressed appreciation and gratitude for the places in which they engaged, describing these places, for example, as "magical", "powerful" or "rewarding". For

Ayoub, this sense of value and meaning was tied to his volunteer role as a playground supervisor at the school where he teaches. For him, this task is undeniably a form of civic engagement, that, while this activity blurs the line between voluntary engagement and work, as teachers are generally expected to fill in various non-teaching roles, still filled him with a strong sense of civic pride:

At school, I have always done extra supervision. It is a form of voluntary work, because you do not get paid, it is not a job, but I am there. (…) You get this recognition when you are overseeing everyone. (…) Even in my work, I started to volunteer."

Civic engagement was also seen as a strategy for participants for "doing something" and remaining active in another place than home. Participants discussed how they wanted to go out, engage, and escape daily routines. Particularly the home environment was, in many cases, associated with a sense of boredom and unproductivity. Jasmin put this into words:

"I come here (i.e., neighborhood association) not just to do voluntary work, so that I can work with people and all of that, but also so that I do not stay still. So, that I do not stay at home, it is all about letting off steam and exchanging … the rhythm of the house … if you stay at home, you are bound to get sick."

This highlights a dual role: while some participants thought about the home environment as an important pillar of their civic engagement, where one helps others and is supportive of those belonging to the family sphere, others perceived it as a domain of inutility and civic dis-engagement.

Participants equally emphasized the importance of places that fostered connection, a sense of community, and encouraged continued engagement. For Christian, the Congolese diaspora association provided a site for coming together and creating community, describing it as a "castle" in the context of the wider neighborhood environment:

"When you come in here, it's like coming into a castle. (…). You see, it is like a neighborhood and everything. So, we do everything here. (Sometimes), we go out just to run an errand, and then we

come back here. We do not really have any contact with the neighbors, because everything is here. (…) we do everything here."

During the interviews, participants also reflected on place-based motivations for civic engagement, which includes the goal of transforming places through collective action. Ayoub, for example, described how he got involved in a community association resisting gentrification, and initiated changes in a public park:

"You know, in life you have to learn to understand people. (…). When I listened carefully to this world I found, I saw that (the people surrounding me) were good for me. (And), at (association), it was a gladiatorial adventure. They want to change the public park, through making use of collective know-how. Oh dear, I did not believe it at first, but it came true. It was a very, very powerful moment. It is little things like that that make me flourish."

Different social dimensions of place seem to support older migrants' civic engagement, such as proximity, opportunities for meaningful engagement and possibilities for community-building. These places sometimes blurred the boundaries between the formal and the private. Participants alluded to these features as constituting the mechanisms that spurred their civic engagement in the various places mentioned in RQ1.

Places of friction: difficulties to civic engagement

Participants described how places sometimes could pose challenges to their civic engagement, because of frictions or frustrations. These could emerge from the nature of the given activity. For example, participants discussed differing visions of civic goals or endgames at volunteering sites or being excluded from formal civic activities. Take for instance Naoual, who felt that a neighborhood committee activity was not meant for her, as it was oriented toward parents, while she did not have children:

"There is a neighborhood committee, run by the residents, and every time, they organize flea markets, they have a party every year, and I think once a month, they play games outside. (…) While I am a part of the committee, I do not partake (she laughs). I do not have a child who can participate in the evening."

In other cases, broader societal conditions generated friction. The COVID-19 pandemic was frequently mentioned as a disruptive event, leading to the closure of formal places and limiting opportunities for civic engagement. Participants also expressed frustration over the lack of government funding and support for community-based initiatives. For some, legal status posed additional barriers, particularly for those without Belgian citizenship. Christian, for example, reflected on his current societal position in relation to his arrival in Belgium, noting the (changing) impact of his non-citizen status:

"(Now), we really participate in our commune. When we arrived, this was not possible. Foreigners did not participate. But as time went by, as soon as foreigners began to have refugee status and Belgian nationality, well, some of them started taking part."

Other frictions that hindered civic engagement stemmed from interpersonal tensions. These experiences varied widely: from participants feeling their hospitality was exploited when helping strangers at home to discomfort in digital environments where civic discussions were disrupted by irrelevant or intrusive messages. For Amadou, digital places often brought about frustrations, and he curbed his digital activity:

"I am not on Facebook anymore. (...) In Senegal, I was sent every day: "good Monday" or "good day". (...) Really, I am not interested. (...) I met a Senegalese guy here last week. Yesterday, he also sent me: "good Tuesday, good Wednesday". Today, he sends me something again, I told him that, frankly, I am not into that, because I do not want to fill my phone with "good day" or "good Monday". I am not into that."

And at times, strained relationships with superiors in volunteer settings also created challenges. Jasmin explained how her expectations about what was considered appropriate behavior were not shared by the manager of the association where she volunteered:

"I had a problem at (association). I worked with them from 2014 until 2018 and then I went on vacation. So, I said to the manager: I am leaving this Saturday. So, when I returned, the manager greeted me in the kitchen and said: "You are going to stop volunteering". I asked him why. He said: "You did not tell us you were going on vacation". So, I said: "Why do you treat me like that?" (…) This touched me a lot."

Participants articulated diverse perspectives on the places where they engaged civically, highlighting the importance of proximity, opportunities for involvement, and the capacity of these places to foster community and connection. They also discussed the significance of recognition and appreciation, while places outside of the household could be seen as sites where active engagement beyond daily routines could be done. However, as the quotes above indicate, these places could also be sites of frictions, shaped by the nature of the activities they provided, broader societal dynamics, or interpersonal frustrations.

Discussion

The results section shows how participants thought about place in relation to their civic engagement. In terms of how places were identified as meaningful for their civic engagement by the participants (RQ1), participants touched upon a diverse array of civic activities, spread across diverse units of place. The emphasis was in many cases on the social and interpersonal. Places can foster for instance a place-based sense of reciprocity between persons and also inspire collective activities. When it comes to how older migrants talk about places in relation to their civic engagement (RQ2), the data suggests that socio-spatial features can encourage these different engagements, but that frictions can equally arise as well. In the discussion, two key messages will be outlined: 1) **place matters for older migrants' civic engagement**, and 2) **an inclusive approach requires a broader definition of civic engagement**.

Place matters for older migrants' civic engagement

From our data, we argue for a more diverse understanding of place to better grasp how civic engagement unfolds in later life. This study highlights the diverse forms of civic engagement among older migrants and the wide range of places they draw upon to get involved. It contributes to a body of research that has largely overlooked older adults' civic engagement (Torres, 2021), and more specifically, the experiences of older migrants within this domain (Reyes & Serrat, 2025). Furthermore, as Cutchin and Rowles (2024) note, gerontology lacks sufficient understanding of the complex interrelations between aging and place. As such, although the participants in this study referenced places in the neighborhood as central to their civic engagement, it was not the sole site of their activity. While place is often conceptualized

as the neighborhood or local community (Hand et al., 2020; Gott et al., 2024), there is increasing recognition of the need to include other-than-local contexts to fully capture the experiences of older migrants (Ho et al., 2024).

Our findings indicate that civic engagement among older migrants can transcend national borders, with participants discussing their connections to and awareness of their countries of origin. It is well established that migrants maintain transnational and extra-local place attachments and support networks (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020) and the findings show that there is certainly transnational awareness and connections among our participants. For Beatrice, for instance, staying informed on what was happening in Ghana was indeed a form of civic engagement. However, while participants were maintained contacts across borders, most of them were more likely to civically engage in their local neighborhoods or urban areas. One exception was Christian, who has been civically and transnationally engaged, for a long period of his life, through a Congolese diaspora association.

In addition to these other-than-local sites, participants identified the home environment as a significant place for civic engagement. As Merikoski (2021) argues, migrants' lives are shaped both by transnational ties and by the home, which serves as a setting for mutual interaction and deep relationality. In our data, the home emerged as a dual site: for some, like Ayoub, it was a place of meaningful engagement, particularly for educating children, while for others, such as Jasmin, it was associated with constraining domestic routines. This reflects broader findings that family-based care and support may constitute a vital, yet often overlooked, form of civic engagement (Celdrán & Chacur-Kiss, 2025), while also potentially limiting engagement in more public forms of involvement (Tanskanen et al., 2022).

Taken together, these findings support the value of adopting a nuanced and pluralistic understanding of place, which encompasses home, local, work, transnational and virtual environments. However, places are not fixed, and they evolve over time (Thurnell-Read, 2024), and so too do their meanings and the forms of civic engagement they enable. Life events (such as migration or retirement) can reshape civic engagement trajectories (Serrat et al., 2020), influencing both how and where engagement occurs. This is evident in the case of Christian, who migrated and wanted to connect with other migrants while simultaneously help

transnationally, and therefore became involved in a diaspora association in Belgium. Furthermore, places can support civic engagement, but they can just as well engender frictions and tensions, as our results indicate (e.g., Amadou's frustration about people sending him "good day" or "good Monday" online messages, or Naoual who was part of a neighborhood committee that not always represented her interests). These examples challenge the traditional win-win narrative that frames civic engagement as beneficial both for the individual and for the community (Serrat et al., 2021).

Given our study's relational design, which emphasizes how places dynamically interrelate with social interactions and civic engagement, it might be useful to consider Ho et al.'s (2024) concept of "aging in networks". This approach shifts the focus from the traditional notion of "aging in place" to understanding how social networks influence the relationship between aging and place. The term highlights how networks make certain places meaningful and enable civic engagement. In our results, participants alluded to how issues of place are relevant (such as proximity or escaping the daily routines of one place [e.g., the home environment] for another [e.g., a neighborhood association]). Nevertheless, more often, participants ascribed meaning to the social interactions that followed or inspired their civic engagement (e.g., engaging in reciprocal activities, doing something collectively, places being "warm" and "welcoming"), which might inspire us to rethink how spatial and social dimensions interrelate with civic engagement**.** Adopting an "aging in networks" perspective therefore aligns well with broader discussions on the geographies of care (e.g., Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Raghuram, 2012) and might offer a valuable framework for future research. It can help elucidate how civic engagement in later life is both locally and globally situated through social connections, and how older migrants navigate and negotiate these overlapping spheres.

An inclusive approach requires a broader definition of civic engagement

While typologies of civic engagement often focus on the nature of the activity (e.g., associational membership, non-formal political engagement or digital civic engagement) (e.g. Serrat, 2025), this perspective has its limitations. Torres et al. (accepted manuscript) caution against defining civic engagement solely by activity type. Their research with older migrants highlights that civic engagement is often framed not only by what individuals do, but by what

they aim to achieve. They describe this as an "endgame-based" perspective. From this view, civic engagement becomes a meaningful pursuit embedded in identity and life purpose (Reyes, 2024). Thus, expanding the definition to reflect older migrants' perspectives may require shifting from a typological to a more existential or identity-based understanding of civic engagement.

Defining civic engagement from the perspective of older migrants therefore requires broadening conventional understandings of the term. In our interviews, participants described forms of engagement that are typically excluded from traditional definitions and that describe a more relational aspect. For example, Tarik valuing a 'simple' chat over financial support or Beatrice staying informed about events in Ghana through YouTube. However, academic, governmental, and policy frameworks continue to privilege formal, institutionalized forms of civic engagement, which have historically excluded migrant populations and often remain inaccessible to them (Reyes, 2022). Moreover, gerontological literature suggests that the exploration of informal and every-day acts of help is not only relevant in the case of older migrants, but that is a broader concern for different groups of older adults as well (e.g., Dean, 2022; Warburton & McLaughlin, 2005).

As reflected in our data, a significant but invisible economy of everyday acts of engagement takes place, characterized by small talk, emotional support, and transnational involvement, that falls outside dominant and "measurable" narratives of how older adults contribute to their surroundings. Discussion is ongoing about what falls 'in' and 'out' of the definition of civic engagement, and what kinds of activities count as civic engagement, or what is rather an activity aimed at connecting with others and accruing social capital (e.g., Berger, 2009; Levasseur et al., 2010), making the question of where civic engagement begins and ends a complex and ambiguous one. Nevertheless, we argue that this ambiguity should be central to discussions of civic engagement in later life. Without this focus, there is a risk that minoritized groups, such as older migrants, who already face structural exclusion from civic life (Torres & Serrat, 2019), remain overlooked. Our study highlights instances of such exclusion, as seen in Jasmin's experience of being asked to stop volunteering after taking a holiday. A key takeaway from this research is the need to adopt a more inclusive definition of civic engagement, which

is one that reflects the perspectives and lived experiences of different groups of older adults, in this case older migrants.

Strengths and limitations

This article offers several key strengths. First, it adopts an inclusive and multidimensional approach that takes participants' own definitions of civic engagement into account. Second, it conceptualizes civic engagement as relational and dynamic rather than static. Through looking at place, the study emphasizes the environmental contexts that shape civic engagement, in contrast to traditional research that focuses primarily on individual-level factors (e.g., Ackermann, 2019; Lühr et al., 2022). Finally, the use of a life-story methodology foregrounds the experiences of older migrants across the life course, rather than viewing their engagement as isolated or taking place in a vacuum (Torres & Serrat, 2025).

Certain limitations should be acknowledged as well. First, although our life-story interviews generated relevant insights, we did not explicitly ask participants about how various dimensions of place shaped their civic engagement. Consequently, the data relating to place is indirect, emerging spontaneously rather than through structured inquiry. Had our interview guide included specific questions on the interplay between place and civic engagement, we likely would have obtained more detailed and nuanced data. Second, even though we included an equal number of men and women in our sample, our data did not provide enough insight into the gendered nuances in how older migrant men and women engage civically in later life. Furthermore, as discussed elsewhere in the paper, our analysis of civic engagement was guided by a deductive, theory-based framework that may not fully reflect the ways in which older migrants themselves understand and experience their engagement. This theoretical lens, while useful for structuring our research, potentially limits the extent to which our findings capture participants' own conceptualizations of engagement to the fullest.

Conclusion

In this study, we have aimed to demonstrate that both the concept of place and civic engagement are multifaceted and diverse, particularly when examined through the lens of

older migrants. Our central argument advocates for recognizing the plurality of places, moving beyond a narrow focus on local communities and neighborhoods when adopting a place-based perspective on civic engagement in later life, while including transnational, digital, work- and family-based places. Possibly, in the light of growing research on the declining role of physical places vis-à-vis digital places (e.g., Markiewicz, 2020), this insight might also be extended to the broader study of older adults' relationship with place, and not solely older migrants. Future research should therefore critically explore how person-place relations are dynamic rather than static and how they might foster the civic engagement of some older individuals but not others. These are complicated and far-reaching questions, and through our focus on older migrants, we have sought to highlight the complexity and multiplicity inherent in place, with the hope of fostering broader reflection and advancing discussion within the field of gerontology.

References

Ackermann, K. (2019) Predisposed to volunteer? Personality traits and different forms of volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 48*, 1119–1142. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019848484

Ågård, P., & Torres, S. (2025). Older people with diverse migrant backgrounds. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life*. Bristol University Press.

Andrews, G.J. (2024). Geographical gerontology: Knowing place in five ways. In M. Cutchin & G. Rowles (eds.), *Handbook on Aging and Place*. Edward Elgar Publishing (pp.15-36).

Atkinson, R. (2002). The life story interview. In J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (eds.), *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Method*. Sage Publications (pp. 121-140).

Au, A., Murad-Kassam, S., Mukanoheli, V., Idrees, S., Ben Mabrouk, E., Abdi, K., Kennedy, M., Whitfield, K., & Salma, J. (2024). Immigrant older adults' experiences of aging in place and their neighborhoods: A qualitative systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *21*(7), 904. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21070904

Baldassar, L., & Wilding, R. Migration, aging, and digital kinning: The role of distant care support networks in experiences of aging well. *The Gerontologist, 60* (2), 313–321. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz156

Berger, B. (2009). Political theory, political science, and the end of civic engagement. *Perspectives on Politics, 7*(2): 335-350. https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759270909080X

Braun V., & Clarke V. (2024). Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: A review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). *Palliative Medicine, 38*(6), 608-616. https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163241234800

Celdrán, M., & Chacur-Kiss, K. (2025). Informal helping behaviours in later life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life*. Bristol University Press (pp. 59-74).

Channoufi, M. (2025). Mapping geographies of home in the Tunisian diaspora: The London case. *National Identities*, https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2025.2511023

Cheung, E.S.L., & Mui, A.C. (2023). Home and neighborhood environmental correlates of civic participation among community-dwelling older adults in Canada. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment, 38*(4), 2687–2705.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-023-10057-7

Cutchin, M., & Rowles, G. (2024). Introduction to the Handbook on Aging and Place. In M. Cutchin & G. Rowles (eds.), *Handbook on Aging and Place*. Edward Elgar Publishing (pp. 2-14).

Dahlberg, L., McKee, K.J., Fritzell, J., Heap, J., Lennartsson, C. (2020). Trends and gender associations in social exclusion in older adults in Sweden over two decades. Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics, 89: 104032. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2020.104032

De Silva, M. (2017). Making the emotional connection: Transnational eldercare circulation within Sri Lankan-Australian transnational families. *Gender, Place & Culture, 25*(1), 88–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339018

Dean, J. (2021). Informal volunteering, inequality, and illegitimacy. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *51*(3), 527-544. https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211034580

Dikmans, B., & Chacur, K. (2024). Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for ageing and childhood research. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (eds.), *Linking Ages: A Dialogue between Childhood and Ageing Research*. Routledge Advances in Sociology (pp. 49-65).

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Honghui, P., Principi, A., Smetcoren, A.-S., Perek-Białas, J., & De Donder, L. (2023). Helping behavior of older adults during the early COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium. *Research on Aging, 45*(1): 8-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221105231

El-Kayed, N. (2024). Neighbourhoods as resource hubs and resource nodes: Civic organisations and political recruitment of first- and second-generation immigrants in Berlin, Germany. *Urban Studies, 62*(6), 1123-1140. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980241270928

Finlay, J., Cannon, M., Meltzer, G.., & Yeh, J. (2024). Aging in third places. In M. P. Cutchin & G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and place*. Edward Elgar Publishing (pp. 221-240).

Gott, M., Wiles, J., Morgan, T., Williams, L., Morgan, K., Black, S., Koh, A., Fanueli, E., Xu, J., Goodwin, H., Pilimatalawwe, D., & Moeke-Maxwell, T. (2024). Older people's contributions during the Covid-19 pandemic response. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 36*(6), 1396–1416. https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2384322

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360–1380. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776392

Grayman-Simpson, N. (2012). Black community involvement and subjective well-being. *Journal of Pan African Studies, 5*(3), 26-42. https://www.jpanafrican.org/docs/vol5no3/5.3BlackCommunity.pdf

Guiso, L., Sapienza, P., Zingales, L. (2011). Civic Capital as the Missing Link. In J. Benhabib, Alberto Bisin & Matthew O. Jackson (eds.), *Handbook of Social Economics*. North-Holland (pp. 417-480).

Hagestad, G.O, & P. Dykstra. (2016). Structuration of the life course: Some neglected aspects. In M.J. Shanahan, J.T. Mortimer, M.K. Johnson (eds.), *Handbook of the Life course*. Springer Publishing Company (pp. 131-157).

Hand, C., Laliberte, D.R., Huot, S., Pack, R., & Gilliland, J. (2020). Enacting agency: Exploring how older adults shape their neighbourhoods. *Ageing & Society, 40*(3), 565–583. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X18001150

Heikkinen, S.J., & Lumme-Sandt, K. (2023). Transnational connections of later-life migrants. *Journal of Aging Studies, 27*(2), 198-206. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.02.002

Ho, E. L.-E., Chua, V., & Feng, C.-C. (2024). Ageing in networks: The unbounded geographies of non-migrant and migrant older adults. *Progress in Human Geography*, *48*(6), 737-751. https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325241263970

Kemppainen, L. (2024). Sensory Dislocation and Transnational Ties: Exploring the Forced Immobility of Older Russian Speakers in Finland Amidst COVID-19 Restrictions. *Global Networks, 25*(1), e12516. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12516

Klaver, K., Miri, A., & Van Praag, L. (2025). "I don't feel like I have a big role here in Belgium": The societal participation of migrantised women in Antwerp (Belgium). *Societal Impacts, 5,* 100108. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socimp.2025.100108

Korpi, T. (2023). Digital spaces and places: A spectrum of online ministry engagement (*Summary paper presented to the Digital Mission Consortia*). https://wheatonbillygraham.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Digital-Spaces-and-Places-FinalB.pdf

Levasseur, M., Lussier-Therrien, M., Biron, M.L., Raymond, E., Castonguay, J., Naud, D., Fortier, M., Sévigny, A., Houde, S., & Tremblay, L. Scoping study of definitions of

social participation: Update and co-construction of an interdisciplinary consensual definition, *Age and Ageing*, *51*(2), afab215, https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/afab215

Lin, S., Wu F., & Li, Z. (2020) Beyond neighbouring: Migrants' place attachment to their host cities in China. *Population, Space and Place*, e2374 (accepted version). https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10109377/

Lühr, M., Pavlova, M.K. & Luhmann, M. (2022). They are doing well, but is it by doing good?: Pathways from nonpolitical and political volunteering to subjective well-being in age comparison. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 23,* 1969–1989. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00480-4

Markiewicz, E. (2020). Third place in the era of virtual communities. *Studia Periegetica*, 28(4), 9-21. https://bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/1391055

Merikoski, P. (2021). 'At least they are welcome in my home!': Contentious hospitality in home accommodation of asylum seekers in Finland. *Citizenship studies, 25*(1), 90-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1769558

Milligan, C., & Wiles, J. (2010). Landscapes of care. *Progress in Human Geography*, *34*(6), 736-754. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132510364556

Oliver, C., Blythe, M, & Roe, J. (2018). Negotiating sameness and difference in geographies of older age. *Royal Geographical Society, 50*(4), 444-451. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12429

Palladino, S. (2019). Older migrants reflecting on aging through attachment to and identification with places. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 50, 100788. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2019.100788.

Raghuram, P. (2012). Global care, local configurations: Challenges to conceptualizations of care. *Global Networks, 12*(2), 155-174. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00345.x

Reuter, A., & Scharf, T. (2025). Digital civic engagement in later life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life*. Bristol University Press (pp. 122-140).

Reyes, L. (2022). Experiences of civic participation among older African American and Latinx immigrant adults in the context of an ageist and racist society. *Research on Aging*, *45*(1), 92-103. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221094288

Reyes, L. (2024). In their words: African American and Latine immigrant older adults (re)define civic participation. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, *79*(10), gbae143.

https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbae143

Reyes, L., & Serrat, R. (2025). Trajectories of civic participation across borders: Drawing from life course narratives of older Latine immigrants. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2025.2478248

Robinson, C.C. (2019). (Re)theorizing civic engagement: Foundations for Black Americans civic engagement theory. *Sociology Compass, 13*(9), e12728. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12728

Rusoja, A. (2024) "Estás luchando…Por toda la comunidad": The communal organizing literacies of Latine/x immigrant families. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education,* 23(3), 380-395. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2024.2324271

Ryan, L., Kilkey, M., Lőrinc, M., & Tawodzera, O. (2021). Analysing migrants' ageing in place as embodied practices of embedding through time: 'Kilburn is not Kilburn anymore'. *Population, Space and Place, 27*(3), e2420. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2420

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., Villar, F. and Gómez, C. (2020) 'Fifty-five years of research into older people's civic participation: Recent trends, future directions', *The Gerontologist*, 60(1): e38–e51. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz021

Serrat, R., Chacur-Kiss, K., Villar, F. (2021). Breaking the win-win narrative: The dark side of older people's political participation. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 56, 100911. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100911.

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., & Villar, F. (2022). Mapping civic engagement in later life: A scoping review of gerontological definitions and a typology proposal. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 33*(3), 615–626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00346-6

Serrat, R., Nyqvist, F., Torres, S., Dury, S., Näsman, M. (2023). Civic engagement among foreign-born and native-born older adults living in Europe: A SHARE-based analysis. *European Journal of Ageing*, 20(16). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-023-00764-z

Serrat, R. (2025). A conceptual framework to understand civic engagement in later life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life*. Bristol University Press (pp. 3-19).

Söderström, J. (2020). Life diagrams: a methodological and analytical tool for accessing life histories. *Qualitative Research, 20*(1), 3-21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118819068

Tanskanen, A.O., Hämäläinen, H., Arpino, B., Danielsbacka, M. (2024). Prosocial activity in later life: Are informal help and care associated with volunteering and charity? *Ageing and Society*, *44*(7):1645-1680. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X22001015

Thakurta, A.G. (2025). Civic place literacies: Tracing urban migrant girls' democratic meaning-making through virtual transnational practitioner research. *Reading Research Quarterly, 60*(1), e579. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.579

Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J.W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political Science Review, 10*(1), 139-163. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230

Thurnell-Read, T. (2023). 'It's a small little pub, but everybody knew everybody': Pub culture, belonging and social change. *Sociology*, *58*(2), 420-436. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385231185936

Torres, S., R. Serrat. 2019. Older migrants' civic participation: A topic in need of attention. *Journal of Aging Studies, 50*, 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2019.100790

Torres, S., Ågård, P., Serrat, R., Chacur Kiss, K., Dikmans, B., Häkkinen, E., Vercauteren, T., & Nyqvist, F. (accepted manuscript). Older migrants on civic engagement. (accepted for publication in the *Journal of Civil Society*).

Torres, S. 2021. Introduction: Framing civic exclusion. In: K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. Van Regenmortel, A. Wanka (eds.), *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives*. Springer, International Perspectives on Aging (pp. 239-243).

Van der Greft, S. (2024). Social participation of low-income older adults in deprived urban neighborhoods in Amsterdam: A study among native Dutch, and Surinamese, Moroccan and Turkish migrants in The Netherlands. *Social Participation in Urban Aging, 30*(8). https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2816

Walsh, K. (2024). Life course perspectives on place. In M.P. Cutchin & G.D. Rowles (eds.), *Handbook on Aging and Place*, Edward Elgar Publishing (pp. 61–81).

Warburton, J., McLaughlin, D. (2005). 'Lots of little kindnesses': Valuing the role of older Australians as informal volunteers in the community. *Ageing and Society*, *25*(5): 715-730. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X05003648

Yarker, S., Doran, P., Buffel, T. (2024). Theorizing "place" in aging in Place: The need for territorial and relational perspectives. *The Gerontologist,* 64(2). gnad002, https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnad002

Zickgraf, C. (2017). Transnational ageing and the 'zero generation': The role of Moroccan migrants' parents in care circulation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *43*(2), 321-337. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1238912

Chapter 6:
“Life Course of Place”:
Older Adults' Social Networks and Informal Help Amidst Urban Change

Published in:

Dikmans, B., Serrat, R., Stegen, H., Vercauteren, T., De Donder, L., & Dury, S. (2025). “Life course of place”: Older adults’ social networks and informal help amidst urban change. *Urban Planning*, 10: 9909.

Chapter 6:

"Life course of place":
Older adults' social networks and informal help amidst urban change

Abstract

This article examines how older adults, who are long-term residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, engage in informal help amid neighborhood change. While dominant narratives often frame older adults as passive recipients of care, this study highlights their often-overlooked role as informal caregivers within their neighborhoods. Drawing on 19 life-story interviews conducted in two Brussels neighborhoods, Kuregem and Brabantwijk, the study analyzes how changes in population composition, public safety, and neighborhood decay affect older adults' social networks and neighborly relations. Using a "life course of place" approach and an "ethics of care" perspective, the analysis shows how neighborhood environments and older residents co-evolve over time. Using composite vignettes as an innovative narrative method, the findings show that neighborhood change has led to reduced social networks, which can hinder informal help. At the same time, long-term residents respond to these changes through localized informal help, drawing on their environmental knowledge, natural neighborhood networks, and personal commitment to helping others. Local community centers are key infrastructures fostering informal help as places where neighbors meet and support each other. The findings present a counter-narrative to hegemonic aging discourses by demonstrating how long-term residents enact care in ways that resist the social exclusion often associated with urban disadvantage. This article contributes to urban planning debates on social infrastructure, aging in place, and the daily practices that sustain public urban cultures of care.

Introduction

Urban neighborhoods are spaces where daily practices of care, from casual neighborly support to organized community solidarity, play a crucial role in sustaining the social fabric. Yet, in many urban environments, processes of neighborhood change challenge the very conditions that allow such public cultures of care to flourish (Fontes & Cordeiro, 2023). Rising unemployment and poverty, shifts in population composition, or public safety concerns often erode the social infrastructure that supports informal care, particularly in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Taei et al., 2023; Yarker, 2022). Older adults, particularly those who have resided in such neighborhoods for decades, are especially vulnerable to these transformations. Their social networks, essential foundations for everyday forms of informal help, often weaken, exposing them to risks of social exclusion (Buffel et al., 2013; Scharf et al., 2005). Yet, despite their embeddedness in local social life, older adults' informal contributions to neighborhood care are frequently overlooked in both research and policy debates, which tend to valorize formal volunteering while neglecting informal practices of mutual aid (Serrat et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2024).

At the same time, broader societal trends, such as individualization and digitalization, are seen to undermine local community and social networks (Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Phillipson, 2007). While these macro forces are well-documented, relatively little is known about how long-term residents experience neighborhood changes at the micro-level and how they respond to these changes through informal helping practices. This gap is particularly salient for older adults who, constrained by socio-economic barriers, remain "stuck in place" (R. J. Smith et al., 2018), experiencing neighborhood decline without the resources to relocate. This study aims to address these lacunae by exploring how neighborhood change shapes the social networks of older adults who are long-term residents (> 20 years) of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, and how this, in turn, influences the informal help they give.

Social networks serve as a key dimension of social capital, and they have been theorized as credential resources for individuals (Bourdieu, 1986), relational enablers of productive action (Coleman, 1988), or as mechanisms that foster collective benefit (Putnam, 2000). In neighborhoods, these social networks encompass both "bonding" ties with close family and

friends, and “bridging” ties with more distant groups such as acquaintances and neighbors (Putnam, 2000). One important element of these bridging social ties is what Gardner (2011) refers to as “natural neighborhood networks”: everyday, low-key, “chance” encounters that occur spontaneously or recur over time (Duppen et al., 2020; Halegoua & Johnson, 2021; Sharifian et al., 2022). Third spaces, such as local coffee shops, community centers, or fast-food restaurants, often provide the physical infrastructure for such encounters (Finlay et al., 2024).

Participation in social networks increases the likelihood of providing informal help, defined as unstructured assistance offered to friends, neighbors, and relatives outside the household (Tanskanen et al., 2024; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Recent studies increasingly recognize older adults as active agents within their communities (e.g., Gott et al., 2024; Hand et al., 2020) who often develop strategies to resist or adapt to changes in their neighborhood (e.g., Taei et al., 2023; Wanka, 2018). Particularly in disadvantaged urban areas, informal help between neighbors has become an important resource, compensating for the withdrawal of public services and institutional support (Martinez et al., 2011; Rutherford et al., 2019). Yet, the question of how older adults’ informal help toward others evolves in the face of adverse neighborhood changes remains underexplored.

To investigate these dynamics, this article employs a dual conceptual framework: a “life course of place” approach (Dikmans et al., 2025; Lekkas et al., 2017) and an “ethics of care” lens (Tronto, 2013). Neighborhoods are not only geographically defined spaces where residents engage in daily activities, but also dynamic spaces of neighborly relations and social participation (Kurtenbach, 2024; Ruonavaara, 2022). A “life course of place” perspective emphasizes how individuals and their neighborhoods co-evolve over time (Oswald et al., 2024), providing a nuanced understanding of the temporality of social networks and informal help. Methodologically, the study uses life-story interviews to explore how long-term residents experience and respond to neighborhood change.

Complementing this, an “ethics of care” approach reframes care as relational, everyday, and deeply embedded in political organizational structures (e.g., state healthcare provision, privatized care systems; Tronto, 2013). Rather than viewing autonomy and dependence as

opposites, this perspective highlights the mutual and relational nature of caring relationships. Instead of the simple dichotomy of "support-giver" versus "support recipient," interdependency is crucial (De Donder et al., 2019; Lambotte et al., 2018). Informal help between neighbors, from mowing your neighbor's lawn to watching over their children, can thus be seen as an important manifestation of a caring neighborhood (De Donder et al., 2024). Through an "ethics of care" lens, this study reframes older adults not as passive recipients of change, but as active contributors to the social fabric of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, a perspective often overlooked in existing research (see for instance Dury et al., 2023 for older adults during the Covid-19 lockdown). Therefore, the study departs from two central research questions:

> RQ1: What are the main neighborhood changes that have impacted older adults' current social networks, as long-term residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods?
>
> RQ2: What are the dynamics of the current informal help that older adults provide in these changing neighborhoods?

In what follows, the study's design and methods will be presented, followed by an analysis of the generated themes through composite vignettes. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications for policy and practice.

Research Design and Methods

The authors of this article followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist, which outlines essential components that should be included in qualitative research reports. To ensure transparency and rigor in terms of qualitative methods and reporting, this section systematically details the research design, research setting, research sample, data collection, data analysis, presentation of results through composite vignettes, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This research is part of the European research project CIVEX ('Exclusion From Civic Engagement of a Diverse Older Population: Features, Experiences and Policy Implications'), which departs from a life-course perspective to understand features of in- and exclusion from civic engagement in later life. The CIVEX project uses a multidimensional framework for studying older adults' civic engagement which encompasses informal help, but also membership of an association, formal volunteering, political participation (both formal [e.g., volunteering for a political candidate or party] and informal [e.g., signing petitions or participating in demonstrations]), as well as digital civic engagement.

Research Setting

Data collection took place between February 2022 and February 2023 in two disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Brussels, Belgium, namely Kuregem and Brabantwijk. These neighborhoods have relatively young populations. In 2022, the average age was 34.2 in Brabantwijk and ranged from 32.1 to 34.3 in Kuregem, which is divided into three administrative parts and therefore averages vary. Older adults (65+) made up 8.08% of Brabantwijk's population and 6.81–8.91% in Kuregem in 2021 (Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse, 2021–2022). The urban area of Brussels is comparatively younger than other cities in Belgium, since its demographic development has always been dominated by migration (Deboosere et al., 2009). The studied neighborhoods, while exhibiting distinct characteristics, are influenced by similar socio-economic and demographic dynamics. These neighborhoods were selected following a comprehensive review of the extant literature on disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and an evaluation of the indicators employed for their identification. These indicators include, but are not limited to, high unemployment rates, high rates of resident turnover, and low educational attainment (e.g., Scharf et al., 2005; A. E. Smith, 2009). Socio-economically, these neighborhoods are part of the so-called "poor crescent" in Brussels, a crescent-shaped area spanning the city center, where inhabitants live on an average individual taxable income lower than €13,100 per year (Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse, 2021–2022).

Research Sample

Interviews were carried out with 19 older adults who were at least 60 years old and who were long-term residents in one of the neighborhoods (i.e., living there for more than 20 years, see Sýkora et al., 2023). Of these interviews, 16 were part of the CIVEX project. Three interviews were conducted using the same methodological approach as in CIVEX, but they fell outside of the project's scope. These three interviews were conducted to collect additional data, on top of what the project required. Participants were mainly recruited face-to-face through local community organizations, such as social restaurants, socio-cultural organizations, and social housing associations (n=7). Some of these centers were specifically geared towards older adults, but the selection was not based on this criterion. Various neighborhood venues were utilized to recruit participants, as the goal was to reach a diverse group of older adults living in the neighborhood. Other recruitment strategies were also employed to counteract an over-representation of participants connected to these local community organizations and to prevent exclusion of neighborhood residents who did not frequent these spaces. These recruitment strategies included snowball sampling (n=6), location-based convenience sampling (n=3), and other strategies (e.g., mouth-to-mouth, or social media; n=3). Nevertheless, these strategies may have led us to overlook older adults who might be most excluded (e.g., those who do not frequent neighborhood spaces overall or have limited social networks).

Of the 19 interviews, 12 were done in Kuregem and 7 in Brabantwijk. Eleven participants reported helping members within their household over the last year (e.g., helping with household chores, doing errands, filling in paperwork), while 17 participants helped individuals outside their household. The participants had lived for on average 42 years in one of the neighborhoods, varying from 23 to 77 years. Eleven participants were born in Belgium, while others migrated in adulthood from other European countries (n=6), and some relocated to Belgium from outside of Europe (n=2). The interviews were conducted in French (n=12), Dutch (n=6), or English (n=1), depending on the preference of the participant. Six men and 13 women were interviewed. The mean age was 75 years, ranging from 64 to 89 years. The duration of the interviews varied between 65 and 149 minutes and no third party was present during the interviews. Participants either lived alone (n=10) or lived together with a spouse,

partner, and/or their children (n=9). Interviews were held at a venue chosen by the participant, either at their home (n=8) or at local community centers (n=11).

Data Collection

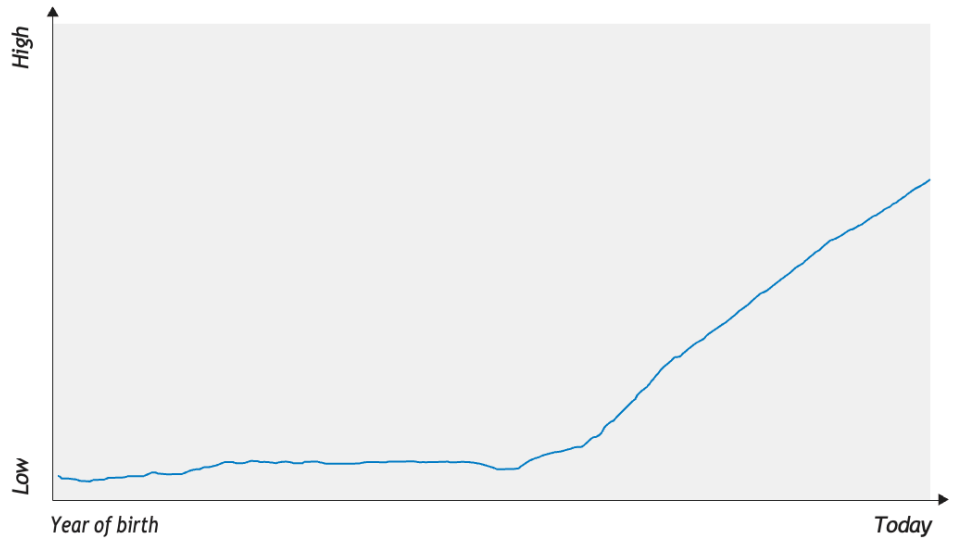
Semi-structured life-story interviews were conducted by the first author of this study, who was employed as a doctoral researcher for the CIVEX project when data collection took place. While the first author conducted most of the interviews (n=16), a Master's student conducted some of the interviews (n=3) as well. The interviews were pilot-tested and audio-recorded.

The interview followed a three-phase structure. In the first phase, participants were asked about their own definition of civic engagement and their current civic engagement, if any. The second phase consisted of five parts in which the various dimensions of civic engagement in CIVEX's multidimensional framework were discussed (i.e., associational membership, formal volunteering, [formal and informal] political participation, digital civic engagement, and informal help). A life-course approach was used during this part to examine how the participants' civic engagement trajectories had evolved over time, zooming in on changes regarding the intensity of their civic engagement at different points in time, as well as the obstacles and enablers that they encountered in their civic engagement throughout their lives. Additionally, participants were explicitly asked to talk about the disadvantaged urban neighborhood they lived in, how it had changed, and whether they felt that the neighborhood environment influenced their civic engagement. Life diagrams supported the interviews. Life diagrams are a form of visual elicitation that fosters participation and reflexivity during interviews (Dikmans & Chacur, 2024; Söderström, 2020). During data collection, they were instrumental in exploring in greater depth how neighborhood changes affected participants' civic engagement.

A completed life diagram depicting one participant's informal help can be found in **Figure 6.1**. The horizontal axis represents a participant's life course, starting from the year of birth until the present. The vertical axis represents the intensity of the informal help given, from low to high. Life diagrams were filled in individually and participants were asked to draw a line representing their civic engagement over time. This served as a basis for discussion and

reflection. The interview's third phase explored participants' experiences of in- and exclusion of civic engagement. They were asked to give detailed examples, including context, persons involved, or thoughts of emotions, during moments when they felt in- or excluded.

Figure 6.1: Example of a filled-in life diagram concerning one participant's informal help.



Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and analyzed in their original language (Dutch, French, or English). The analysis for this article focused on the data related to one of the five dimensions of civic engagement, namely the participants' informal help, while not overlooking the full interview transcripts for a mention of neighborhood change, social networks, and informal help mentioned in other parts of the interview. A narrative approach to qualitative thematic analysis (e.g., Butina, 2015) was chosen to spotlight the stories of the participants. The goal was to remain as close as possible to their lived or subjective experiences, which meant zooming in, for instance, on their feelings, perceptions, preferences, or ambitions, throughout their lives (Karunamuni et al., 2021). The data were analyzed using the QUAGOL (Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven) approach (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012, 2021). The QUAGOL approach fosters inductive thematic analysis, while also recognizing the narrative richness of the data. The eventual analysis consisted of two parts.

In the first part, the coding process was thoroughly and narratively prepared following five steps. First, the interviews were carefully re-read, and relevant passages were highlighted. Second, a narrative report of each interview was drafted, in which the individual stories were written down in relation to the research question. Third, a so-called conceptual interview scheme was made, wherein the excerpts of the participants' stories were reviewed to explore the relevant themes of the research in a more structured manner (i.e., neighborhood changes, altered social networks, and current informal help). Fourth, a fitting-test was conducted to determine whether the conceptual interview scheme was suitable for the various interviews. The individual transcripts were reviewed in a forward-backward movement with the conceptual interview scheme in mind. The aim was to assess whether concepts emerging from the transcripts needed to be incorporated to answer the research questions. Fifth, a constant comparison of the different interview transcripts was performed. In this part, the conceptual interview schemes were refined by comparing them with other interviews.

In the second part, the actual coding was done thematically using MAXQDA 2022 (Release 22.2.0). First, based on the findings from the first part, a list of preliminary codes was drawn up. Second, the interview transcripts were revisited to determine whether the preliminary codes aligned with the previously highlighted excerpts. Third, concepts were clustered into preliminary themes and sub-themes, and the coding tree took form. Particular attention was given to the way participants spoke about neighborhood change in relation to social networks and their current informal help, following the study's objectives. Sub-themes were constructed through thematic analysis, as analytically significant sub-components of the main theme, based on a rigorous coding process. Fourth, the interviews were re-read and definitive main themes and sub-themes were generated. Fifth, a description of the results was written out using composite vignettes (see below).

Composite Vignettes

Results are presented in the form of composite vignettes. Composite vignettes consist of combined narrative excerpts, grounded in the data, which merge the experiences of different narrators into one all-encompassing character story (Blodgett et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2023). Although not conventional for thematic analysis, they have been used to showcase the richness

of participants' experiences through storytelling, which otherwise goes lost in the classical writing up of thematic analysis. Furthermore, as the authors of this study aimed to highlight commonly shared experiences of neighborhood change, social networks, and informal help, this style of presentation was deemed the most suitable. Each vignette combines the stories of the various participants in an overarching story. The vignettes span both studied neighborhoods, as similar themes were discussed in each. However, each vignette reflects the narratives of different participants. **Table 6.1** shows which participants' stories were coded for each vignette and which were not. Some participants are only represented in two of the vignettes (e.g., Participant KU_10, Participant BW_1), illustrating the tension that existed between recognizing individuals' narratives and describing shared experiences when crafting the vignettes.

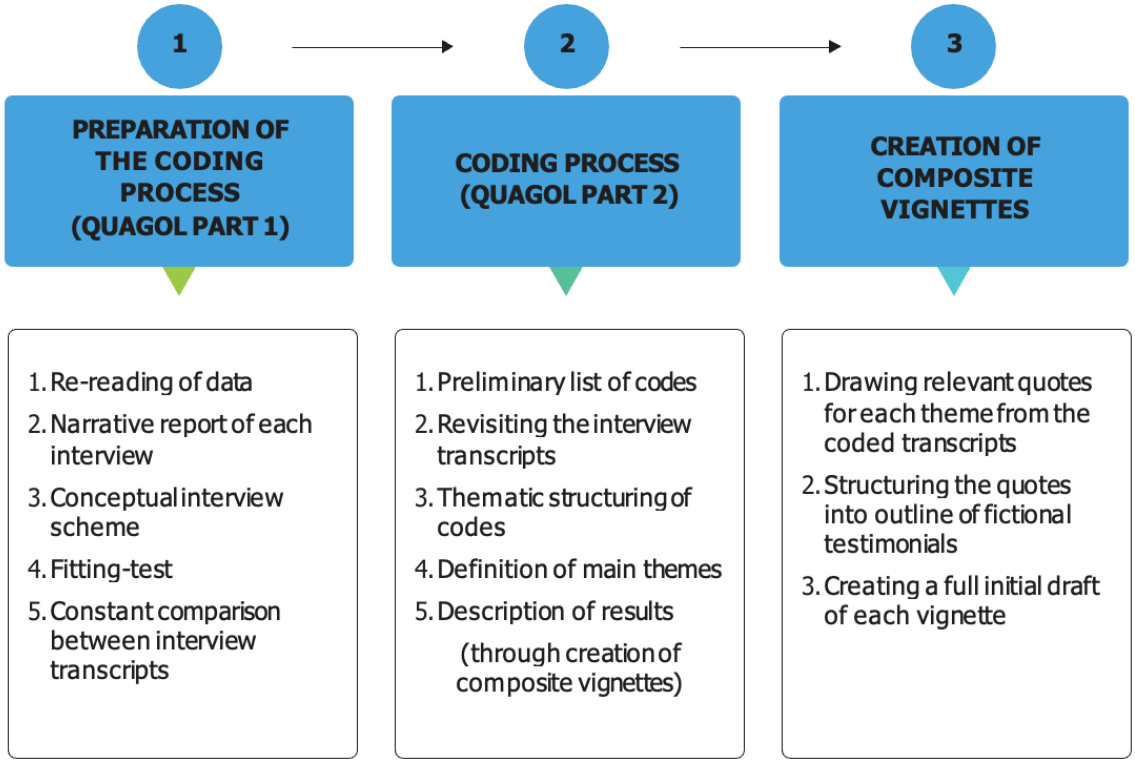
Table 6.1: Overview of the creation of the composite vignettes based on coded excerpts from the participants' stories.

		Vignette 1	Vignette 2	Vignette 3	Vignette 4	Vignette 5
Kuregem	Participant KU_1	X	X		X	X
	Participant KU_2		X	X		X
	Participant KU_3	X	X	X		X
	Participant KU_4	X	X	X	X	X
	Participant KU_5		X		X	
	Participant KU_6	X	X	X	X	X
	Participant KU_7	X			X	X
	Participant KU_8	X	X	X	X	X
	Participant KU_9	X	X	X	X	X
	Participant KU_10			X		X
	Participant KU_11	X	X		X	X
	Participant KU_12	X	X	X	X	X
Brabantwijk	Participant BW_1			X		X
	Participant BW_2	X			X	
	Participant BW_3	X	X	X	X	X
	Participant BW_4	X				
	Participant BW_5	X	X	X	X	
	Participant BW_6	X	X		X	
	Participant BW_7	X	X	X	X	X

The choice of presenting the vignettes separately from the authors' analysis is deliberate, following for instance Claeys et al. (2025), Crocker et al. (2021), and Knight et al. (2023). However, a short analysis paragraph has been included for each vignette to better explain the analytical work that preceded each narrative.

The creation of the vignettes followed Claeys et al.'s (2025) instructions for organizing vignettes. Five themes were developed, each with sub-themes, following the analytical process (see the results section). First, relevant quotes for each theme, and sub-theme, were drawn from the coded transcripts. Second, these quotes were combined into outlines of fictional testimonials. Finally, a full initial draft of each vignette was produced by linking the relevant quotes for each theme with sub-themes structuring the vignette's sub-sections, and shaping them into a testimonial format. A visualization of the steps undertaken during the QUAGOL analysis, and the creation of the vignettes, can be found in **Figure 6.2.**

Figure 6.2: Visualization of the steps undertaken during the QUAGOL analysis and the creation of the vignettes.



In the results section, direct quotes from the transcripts are *italicized* to clearly distinguish the participants' own words from the constructed narrative within the vignettes. By marking these direct quotes, the vignettes do justice to the authenticity of the participants' voices while also showing how their narratives have been woven together to capture broader thematic patterns. These original quotes were in most cases translated from Dutch (n=6) or French (n=12) to English. A third interview language was English (n=1).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board VUB: Human Sciences Ethics Committee (ECHW_324 / Date ethical approval: 8 December 2021).

Since the first author was neither an older adult nor a local resident and had not personally faced socio-economic challenges or health issues, it was essential to approach the research with humility, sensitivity, and a commitment to accurately and transparently conveying the experiences of persons who are often marginalized. This aligns with Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) perspective that researchers do not need to be part of the group they study to understand and represent participants' experiences effectively. However, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) emphasize the importance of being open, honest, authentic, and genuinely interested in participants' perspectives. To foster this connection, the first author consistently spent time in the neighborhoods, engaged with participants on multiple occasions, and actively sought their feedback. Holmes (2020) suggests that such familiarity may enhance participants' trust in the researcher. Additionally, the inclusion of life diagrams during data collection fostered reflection and prioritized participants' narratives. Flexibility was also key, allowing participants to determine the timing and location of their interviews.

During the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or express their concerns. All participants were given clear information (e.g., about the research, their right to withhold or withdraw information, or to decline to answer questions they deemed sensitive). They also signed an informed consent. In a few cases, a break was provided during the interviews, as life-story interviews can be long and exhaustive.

During the analysis, the first author took the lead, while all co-authors analyzed different parts of the data, provided feedback during the various phases in the coding process, and discussed the (intermediate) results as a group. The authors reflected as much as possible, both individually and collectively, on their positionality and personal biases. For example, all members of the research team have experience working with older adults, while some have personal experience with informal care, and some live in urban areas. Implicit notions of what

informal help means for older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods were constantly questioned and re-thought throughout the research process.

Results

RQ1: Neighborhood Change and Social Networks

Through the described analytical process, two main themes were created with regard to how participants' social networks connected to neighborhood change: "Changes in population composition have reduced social networks" and "Declining safety and neighborhood decay reduce familiarity with one's direct environment." These themes portray a shared narrative of adverse change in the neighborhoods, present in most of the interviews. Although, at times, positive changes were referred to by participants, this was not further developed as a theme or a sub-theme. The themes are presented through two composite vignettes, and each is introduced by a short analytical section.

Vignette 1: Changes in Population Composition Have Reduced Social Networks

This first vignette is organized around three sub-themes. The first sub-theme shows how participants felt that, in the past, there used to be a strong sense of community in their neighborhood, exemplified through opportunities for civic engagement. Knowing one another or having organizations and other facilities nearby were deemed important for community building. However, the second sub-theme of the vignette shows how neighborhood changes, and more particularly ongoing in- and out-migration, have, in the words of the participants, decreased opportunities for establishing new social networks over the years. In the third sub-theme, participants expressed feeling less part of their neighborhood community today:

> In the past, I knew what the neighborhood had to offer. The environment came to life with organizations, shops, and bars, offering numerous opportunities for engagement. Back then, *we were good neighbors to each other*. People knew each other.

With migrants, contact is often good, but it is not the same. Social networks have considerably decreased. Moreover, having lived here for a long period of time, I have witnessed how the neighborhood's population has changed. Several of the people I know are still here, and many have left, but *I am not sitting in front of the window all day to keep track of who comes and goes*. In this context, creating new social networks requires effort and adaptation. The arrival of different groups of people has made it difficult to communicate with others. The question is: How can one engage with his or her neighbor, when the neighborhood population is constantly changing?

Now, *I am sort of the neighborhood's furniture*. With time, my close circle of friends has been reduced, because those persons have died. Others have simply moved out. The people who say hello to me in the neighborhood have become scarce. I feel disconnected from many of my current neighbors, even though fostering relationships remains important to me. Today, *I do not even know my neighbor's name*. Over the years, the vibrant spirit that once was present in this neighborhood has disappeared. *It is everyone for themselves here*.

Overall, this vignette shows how, for the participants, neighborhood cohesion has drastically deteriorated due to the adverse changes in the population composition (e.g., people leaving, different groups arriving), which resulted, in their view, in estrangement between neighbors (e.g., "I do not even know my neighbor's name").

Vignette 2: Declining Safety and Neighborhood Decay Reduce Familiarity With One's Direct Environment

This second vignette is also organized around three sub-themes. The first sub-theme illustrates how older adults' experience of neighborhood decay, such as the increased socio-spatial density in, or the declining general appearance of, the neighborhood, has made them "very uneasy" (e.g., through houses that are demolished, a decline in the neighborhood's appearance). The second sub-theme looks deeper into a general sentiment of insecurity among participants. This feeling is represented in the vignette by, for instance, the realization that the world is becoming "raw and deranged" and that children no longer play on the streets. In the

third sub-theme of the vignette, participants emphasized a decrease in social networks and a diminished sense of community due to the adverse neighborhood changes mentioned earlier:

> *Here, it is a ghetto!* Many of the old houses have been replaced or demolished, and there has been a decline in the general appearance of the neighborhood. The streets are befouled with litter. *Nowadays, everything feels congested here*. Time has not stood still. It is hard to imagine that this was once a spacious environment. *There is rampant poverty in the neighborhood*. This makes me very uneasy.
>
> Yes, *this is a dangerous neighborhood*. There has been a downturn in safety, *and I have often been swindled, a lot of times*. In the past, *children used to play in the street. Now, the neighborhood has changed*. I regularly feel afraid, and throughout the years, I have become increasingly reluctant to go out by myself. The world is becoming *raw and deranged*. I have found myself in unfavorable situations far too often here.
>
> These neighborhood changes have had an impact on my life. *I do not dare go anywhere on my own anymore. I am telling you: I have lost all sense of anything and that scares me*. Neighbors who had the financial means have left when they had the chance. *Some people have understood: "We are not staying here with our children. We are gone."*

In this vignette, participants expressed a sense of place detachment (Lau et al., 2021), together with increased feelings of insecurity and discomfort in their neighborhoods (e.g., "yes, this is a dangerous neighborhood"), which, in their view, reduced their social networks (e.g., neighbors moving away).

RQ2: Current Informal Help

Regarding the current informal help of older adults as long-term residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, three primary themes were created: "Decreased social networks lead to reduced informal help," "Being a long-term resident means helping others," and "Local community centers are places where neighbors meet and help each other." The three themes

are explained through three composite vignettes, and each is introduced by a short analytical section.

Vignette 3: Decreased Social Networks Lead to Reduced Informal Help

This third vignette consists of three sub-themes. The first sub-theme shows how opportunities for bonding have become scarce in the neighborhood. Participants spoke of shutting themselves off and, as a result, detaching themselves from neighborhood relations. Conversely, other participants spoke about being shut off because they do not know their neighbors anymore. Nevertheless, they also talked about providing informal help to others, even though they downplayed this informal help, explaining that it cannot really qualify as volunteering. In the third sub-theme, participants discussed how their help towards others has diminished, for various reasons, which can be for instance individual (e.g., fear of being falsely accused of theft), or socio-demographic (e.g., the observation of an increasing number of young people in the neighborhood):

> From time to time, I feel the urge to talk to my neighbors, but initiating more profound conversation is not easy. *Perhaps, at my age, I have shut myself off somewhat*. Opportunities are also scarce. In this sense, my neighborhood has not given me much. In my building, at church, or in public places, I see unfamiliar faces among an increasingly younger generation. *I do not even know my new neighbors anymore*. Even though I always say hello to the persons I come across, *those contacts remain shallower*.
>
> Sometimes I donate some money, or I prepare sandwiches for those in need. Yes, I help, *but in a way that you do not even notice*. I can give a hand when someone asks for support, but the small help I give to those around me *cannot truly qualify as volunteering*.
>
> Also, my help towards others has decreased. A lack of confidence in others has put a strain on the help I give. *I am involved in helping, but never at others' homes*. I am too afraid of being falsely accused of stealing something. My age plays a role as well. *Now,*

> *there are a lot of young people. I am still standing, you know, that is not the problem, but for how long? I do not know*.

This vignette illustrates how the participants reflected on their current informal help. This informal help mainly consisted of small helping behaviors (e.g., donating money, preparing sandwiches) that were frequently undervalued by the participants (e.g., "in a way that you do not even notice").

Vignette 4: Being a Long-Term Resident Means Helping Others

This fourth vignette is made up of two sub-themes. The first sub-theme, which spans the first two sections of the vignette, shows how the older adults in this study engaged in informal help because they felt responsible for their neighbors. They spoke about leading by example, which included offering advice to neighbors or donating items to those in need. The participants placed high importance on exerting a positive influence on others. The second sub-theme (represented by the last section of the vignette) expands further on this, as participants talked about how the informal help they provided was even motivated because of, and not despite, the fact that they lived in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood:

> *For me, the neighborhood is my engagement*. It is important to support newcomers, especially considering their unfamiliarity with the area. Also, I feel a sense of responsibility for my environment, which drives me to help others. I lead by example: I go out by bike to show that one does not always need a car for getting around, or I repair discarded items to donate them afterwards. Neighbors come to me for advice, whether it is the woman next door seeking social housing, someone inquiring about home-buying, or a person asking for an address. I gladly help them. *People know me, sometimes more than I know them, from the fact that I have lived here for so long*.
>
> I prioritize being a positive influence on others, and people respect me for this. *I leave the problems in my life at home when I go out*. For instance, there are people who beg for money in the street. I sometimes provide financial support, but more often *I send them to associations to eat or sleep*. I prefer to help others quietly. *There is no need to*

let people know. I see my help as a personal undertaking that benefits both me and others.

Certainly, *you notice that this is a neighborhood with a lot of challenges, a lot of deprivation, and that there is work to be done there, but that stimulates you to make an extra effort*. Showing the best version of myself is therefore crucial, particularly because *more and more people are forced to live on the streets and many people are losing their jobs*.

This vignette shows how, partly due to the precarious context of the neighborhood, it was important for the participants to show a good example by helping others, using their environmental knowledge as long-term residents (e.g., referring persons to associations). As is also the case in **Vignette 3**, the participants' stories bring to the fore how participants downplayed their informal help to others, seeing it rather as a personal endeavor than as a contribution to society.

Vignette 5: Local Community Centers Are Places Where Neighbors Meet and Help Each Other

This fifth vignette represents three sub-themes. The first sub-theme illustrates how most of the older adults in this study participated in activities organized by local community centers to engage with neighbors. In some instances, they even organized their own activities. Moreover, in the second sub-theme, the emphasis lies on the fact that these local community centers were thought of as places that stimulate informal help. Interactions in these spaces contributed to overcoming the feelings of disconnection from one's environment that participants expanded on in **Vignette 1** and **2**. Some participants even spoke about having found a family. The third sub-theme of this vignette shows how these local community centers serve as places for seeking help as well as providing it:

If you take part in something with others, your heart opens. I have been coming here (i.e., local community center) for a few years now, and I am happy to encounter many different people. I come here to participate in the various activities offered. I also

organize my own activities for others, such as collective laughing exercises and language exchanges.

Nevertheless, *the main reason why I come here is to communicate and share stories*. Although initiating interactions with strangers can be overwhelming, this space helps me to overcome this initial fear. I said to myself at some point that I did not want to be confined to my house anymore. *Sometimes, there are interiors where you do not feel like staying*. Here, people value your company. I rarely feel lonely. This place makes me feel connected, newcomers are welcomed, and you experience what the neighborhood has to offer. Here, *I have found a family*.

I have also found the courage to engage with and help others when they ask for it. For instance, *when I ask someone for help, there is always somebody to lend a hand*. In my view, it is the social role of this place that is so important. *Giving to others, I do it gladly, and here, it just works*. As an example, there is a visitor here who comes regularly to eat. He has difficulties walking, and as soon as I see him, *I let him sit down and I collect the food for him, and then sit with him. He even calls me "my wife"* (laughs). *And at times, he has a problem with his eyes. So, anytime he comes, he will bring the medication, and I administer it on the eye*.

This vignette illustrates the importance of local community centers as places for meeting and providing informal help (e.g., "giving to others, I do it gladly, and here, it just works"). This informal help sometimes even resulted in more sustained forms of caring relations (e.g., collecting food for others or providing companionship).

Discussion

The present study examines the informal help older adults give to others, as well as their social networks, which are important elements of caring communities (De Donder et al., 2024). More particularly, the emphasis is on how changes in neighborhoods affect the social networks and informal help of older adults as long-term residents in two disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Brussels, Belgium. This study highlights the adverse impact of neighborhood changes on the

social networks of older adults. Changes in population composition, but also declining safety and neighborhood decay, resulted in a general sense of unfamiliarity with one's direct environment. Participants also reported that it has become more difficult to provide informal help due to decreased social networks. Nevertheless, as a reaction to those changes, the participants of this study show that they are not passive bystanders: They actively help neighbors as well. The informal help they provide is spurred on by the unique knowledge and expertise that long-term residents possess, and through local community centers that stimulate informal help among neighbors. This discussion is centered around four overarching take-aways from the results section, namely "Adverse neighborhood change might lead to being 'stuck in place' or staying in place," "Older adults exhibit strategies of resistance through their informal help," "Local community centers are important for informal help," and "Care co-evolves with the neighborhood environment through time."

Adverse Neighborhood Change Might Lead to Being "Stuck in Place" or Staying in Place

There seems to be a relationship between population change, feelings of insecurity in neighborhoods, and the social capital of its long-term residents (see De Donder et al., 2012; Versey, 2018). Sometimes, the neighborhood changes mentioned by participants were related to specific events. In Brabantwijk, participants spoke about the construction of high-rise apartments and office buildings that decreased social networks. In Kuregem, participants referred to specific points in the 1960s when migration started. However, more frequently, these were narratives of decline that were not associated with particular points in time, but instead reflected shifts in participants' feelings about neighborhood use and social connections. These adverse neighborhood changes, embedded in the neighborhood's life course, have had implications for older adults' understanding of their direct environment. Several of the participants' narratives confirm that both their social networks and neighborhood cohesion were stronger prior to the neighborhood changes. This is a well-known dynamic in so-called transitional urban neighborhoods (Mahbubur & Mandarano, 2021), reinforcing the conclusion often found in the literature that living in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood might deprive these older adults of close and stable social networks (Cornwell & Behler, 2015).

R. J. Smith et al. (2018) refer to these older adults as being "stuck in place." The authors further explain how older adults in changing neighborhoods often lose the stable social networks that previously made them feel part of the neighborhood community, while simultaneously lacking the financial means to relocate. However, the study at hand requires some nuance: Most participants in fact expressed the loss of social networks and a sense of community in their neighborhoods, but some made a conscious decision to stay, even when their financial situation might have permitted them to move elsewhere. It is in these cases not a matter of being stuck in place, but rather a positive decision to stay. Similarly, several studies suggest that diverse groups of older adults respond in various ways to neighborhood change, which in turn impacts their attachment to place (Burns et al., 2012; Lecovich, 2014). The findings of the current study also allude to how changes in the neighborhood's composition may not necessarily lead to decreased social networks, as, for instance, local community centers can foster new networks between neighbors. This highlights the complex ways in which older adults experience neighborhood change, and how they maintain a feeling of attachment to their neighborhoods.

Older Adults Show Strategies of Resistance Through Their Informal Help

This study highlights how older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, and particularly long-term residents, show strategies of resistance. Previous research confirms that adverse neighborhood changes might erode older adults' social networks, leaving them more vulnerable to social isolation and exclusion (e.g., Dahlberg, 2020; Versey, 2018). However, the participants in this study did in various cases talk about informally helping neighbors. These forms of informal help, while at times downplayed by the same participants, can be seen as important "strategies of resistance" that long-term residents use to resist pressures of exclusion resulting from adverse neighborhood change (Buffel & Philipson, 2019; Lees et al., 2018). These "strategies of resistance" range from still engaging in neighborly informal relations, although reduced through altered social networks, to actively helping neighbors through one's environmental knowledge as a long-term resident.

Moreover, informal neighborly care relations in the face of adverse neighborhood change are stimulated through various forms of community capital (Wild et al., 2013), such as using one's

knowledge of the neighborhood's history, or spatial capital, being the ability to navigate the neighborhood's geography (De Decker, 2023). This spatial capital is derived from one's "autobiographical insideness" (Rowles, 1983). One other important concept to better understand these strategies of resistance is that of "natural neighborhood networks" (Gardner, 2011), which, although diminished over time, still enable the participants of this study to help neighbors. These different forms of capital are pivotal for the participants of this study for maintaining place attachment and supporting others in the neighborhood through the informal help they give, even in the face of adversity throughout the neighborhood's life course.

Local Community Centers Are Important for Informal Help

The findings spotlight the crucial role of local community centers for strengthening participants' informal help and their social networks. Informal help among neighbors is often less profound when there is no or low personal relationship between them (Volckaert et al., 2021). Local community centers can thus be vital platforms for facilitating social interactions and stimulating the informal help of older adults. As venues that encourage relationships and foster a feeling of community between neighbors in the face of declining social networks, these local community centers have become an essential part of the neighborhoods' social infrastructure, and they provide diverse possibilities for older adults to interact with others and engage in new social networks (Yarker, 2019).

In this research, the vital role of local community centers as places for connection, for accruing bridging social capital, or for fostering meaningful neighborhood networks is confirmed, in conjunction with broader research (see De Donder et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). Many participants attested that the local community center is a place where one engages with persons one would likely never have met otherwise. Participants described their involvement in recurrent social interactions through the local community center. These interactions are important, as they often involve reciprocal help between neighbors. Halegoua and Johnson (2021) talk about the importance of "chance encounters" and how opportunities in the neighborhood for meeting others are pivotal for neighborhood caring relations. In the studied neighborhoods, local community centers appear to facilitate, but also enhance and solidify, these chance encounters.

Similarly, local community centers serve as places where one engages in neighborly care, such as participating in activities together, providing others with food or medication, or just chatting up with neighbors. Care is a broad concept that "includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 103). In the interviews conducted for this study, numerous activities that were identified as informal care for neighbors and the neighborhood are examples of this broad notion of care. Participants spoke about maintaining and continuing social interaction and informal help through local community centers, as is exemplified by their expression of using the space to "communicate and share stories." Participants spoke about activities that can be considered repairing as well, such as providing care for somebody else through collecting food or administering medicine. As such, participants' stories suggest that caregiving is entangled with the material infrastructure that local community centers provide.

Care Co-evolves With the Neighborhood Environment Through Time

This study has enriched the debate around how care interrelates with the neighborhood environment during the life course, while adopting an "ethics of care" approach. The concept of care is a holistic and relational practice that describes a process, rather than one single activity (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Gardner (2011) explains how thinking about caring through the lens of neighborhood relations can shift the focus away from care as a one-way process, as is often the case in studies on caring dynamics within families or the household, while also helping us to think about care as reciprocal or interdependent. For instance, local community centers seem to be places where care and interdependence take shape. Participants, for instance, stated how they were able to help, but also ask for help. They therefore play a vital role in supporting this neighborly care.

Moreover, the two studied disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can be seen as places where care between neighbors still takes place, despite adverse neighborhood changes that have negatively impacted social networks. The addition of a "life course of place" perspective to the "ethics of care" approach brings the literature on the topic of older adults' care relations further, as researchers are becoming aware that older adults' lives are not only influenced by

neighborhood features, but that they also contribute to their surroundings (e.g., Gott et al., 2024; Hand et al., 2020), and this interaction seems to co-evolve through time.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

This article has focused on the effects of community change and neighborhood decay on older adults' social networks and informal help in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. This study aims to contribute to the theoretical lenses that researchers use to look at older adults in these neighborhoods. Future studies could benefit from a new synergy between alternative theoretical paradigms related to exclusion, life course, and the environment (Dikmans et al., 2025). Viewing person–place relations as dynamic and co-evolving (Oswald et al., 2024) is relevant in this sense. This article incorporates this view through using a "life course of place" approach (Lekkas et al., 2017). Consequently, the findings of this study suggest that neighborhoods possess life courses characterized by neighborhood changes that shape the social networks and the informal help of residents.

It is pivotal for researchers, but equally for policymakers and practitioners, to recognize that older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods have strategies of resistance in the face of adverse neighborhood change. A focus on how they informally help others surpasses a one-sided exclusion lens and recognizes how older adults, notwithstanding important adverse environmental changes, still informally help those around them through "natural neighborhood networks" (Gardner, 2011), or what Halegoua and Johnson (2021) call "chance encounters." Policymakers and practitioners might want to focus more on creating opportunities for connecting people through activities, such as organizing clean-up days in neighborhoods or building a bus stop together. Urban design plays a crucial role in creating these opportunities (Aelbrecht & Quentin, 2023). Public investments in physical spaces are therefore needed to strengthen encounters between neighbors, especially those physical places in the neighborhood where residents can casually meet (Carstensen et al., 2022). For instance, so-called "third spaces," being public or commercial venues that exclude the home and work environment (Finlay et al., 2024), are neighborhood sites where activities of "bonding" and "bridging" can take place. In these spaces, people come together to connect and feel part of their community. These spaces might even evolve into places of resilience (Golant, 2015).

This study has shown the role that local community centers play in strengthening social networks and stimulating informal help. Local community centers provide opportunities for creating and maintaining those routinized relations that might even evolve into more structural and recurring forms of informal care between older neighborhood residents. As older adults spend more time in their neighborhoods as they age, regular contact with and mutual support between neighbors become more important (Seifert, 2020). This realization is important to include in future policy and practice. Local authorities might, through for instance actively funding and supporting local community centers, foster aging in place of older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, an insight that is corroborated by other studies as well (see Dahlberg, 2020; Walsh et al., 2012). Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of the inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms of neighborhood networks (Ruonavaara, 2022), and to remain conscious of who finds their way to, and therefore makes use of, local community centers, and who does not (Custers & Engbersen, 2022). Future community interventions could therefore invest in neighborhood encounters through formal spaces that value the contributions of diverse groups of older adults as a form of neighborhood care.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of this study is its engagement with long-term residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, a perspective that is often missing in discussions on aging and place (Buffel & Philipson, 2019). Second, this research looks at older adults' experiences of neighborhood change in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, which is a topic that has received increasing attention (e.g., Buffel et al., 2013; Scharf et al., 2005), but which remains frequently overlooked. Third, the combination of the QUAGOL analytical approach (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012, 2021) and the use of narrative vignettes as a presentation style does justice to the shared narratives of participants. Fourth, an epistemological focus on "ethics of care" valorizes the informal help, albeit sometimes small, that older adults provide to their neighbors, highlighting the importance of micro-encounters in the neighborhood for stimulating neighborly care.

Nevertheless, two main limitations persist. Primarily, in the two neighborhoods, participants were mainly recruited through local community centers, possibly fostering the inclusion of

older adults who are already more inclined to be an engaged neighbor. The chosen recruitment strategy could be a reason why most participants emphasize the role of local community centers in the informal help they give. To address this limitation, several participants were at a later stage recruited through location-based convenience sampling. Secondly, the choice of vignettes as a presentation style highlights common experiences but downplays individuals' unique and separate characteristics (Knight et al., 2023). For instance, more women were interviewed than men (six men against 13 women), but the vignettes do not account for the gendered nature of life-course experiences (Hagestad & Dykstra, 2016). As such, the focus was on finding a common narrative and the chosen presentation style risks overlooking participants' narratives that might be contradictory to the findings, while also disregarding nuance in individual quotes (e.g., gaps, hesitations, silences) in favor of the collective storyline.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the altered social networks and the current informal help of 19 older adults, who are long-term residents of two disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Brussels, Belgium (Brabantwijk and Kuregem). Two main neighborhood changes, namely changes in population composition and declining safety and neighborhood decay, were seen as conducive to the reduced social networks of the participants. This showcases the study's "life course of place" approach: Neighborhoods have life trajectories of their own that influence residents' lives (Lekkas et al., 2017). Equally, the current informal help provided by the participants decreased through reduced social networks, but being a long-term resident can spur on informal help. Local community centers can also be important places for creating informal connections. The main take-away lesson that this article offers is that the relationship between older adults' informal help toward neighbors and their neighborhood environments is entangled. Neighborhood changes reduced social networks, but the participants of this study showed agency through informally helping others. This can be seen as a form of resistance to adverse change, while changing their neighborhoods for the better. It is therefore important to highlight that the networks of neighborly care needed for a caring community to thrive do still exist in the studied disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

References

Aelbrecht, P., & Quentin, S. (2023). Geographies of encounter, public space, and social cohesion: Reviewing knowledge at the intersection of social sciences and built environment disciplines. *Urban Planning*, *8*(4), 63–76. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i4.6540

Blodgett, A. T., Schinke, R. J., Smith, B., Peltier, D., & Pheasant, C. (2011). In Indigenous words: Exploring vignettes as a narrative strategy for presenting the research voices of Aboriginal community members. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *17*(6), 522–533. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411409885

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Publishing Group.

Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse. (2021–2022). *Interactieve kaarten van statistische indicatoren*. https://wijkmonitoring.brussels/kaarten

Buffel, T., & Philipson, C. (2019). Ageing in a gentrifying neighbourhood: Experiences of community change in later life. *Sociology*, *53*(6), 987–1004. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519836848

Buffel, T., Phillipson, C., & Scharf, T. (2013). Experiences of neighbourhood exclusion and inclusion among older people living in deprived inner-city areas in Belgium and England. *Ageing & Society*, *33*(1), 89–109. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X12000542

Burns, V. F., Lavoie, J.-P., & Rose, D. (2012). Revisiting the role of neighbourhood change in social exclusion and inclusion of older people. *Journal of Aging Research*, *2012*(1), Article 148287. https://doi.org/10.1155/ 2012/148287

Butina, M. (2015). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical Laboratory Science*, *28*(3), 190–196. https://doi.org/10.29074/ascls.28.3.190

Carstensen, T. A., Skytt-Larsen, C. B., Busck, A. G., & Søraa, N. G. (2022). Constructing common meeting places: A strategy for mitigating the social isolation of disadvantaged neighbourhoods? *Urban Planning*, *7*(4) 486–498. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v7i4.5821

Claeys, A., Chaouni, S. B., Tricas-Sauras, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Bridging the gaps: Narratives of informal carers of older migrants with dementia on professional care. *Ageing & Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X25000017

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, *94*(1), S95–S120. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780243

Cornwell, E. Y., & Behler, R. L. (2015). Urbanism, neighborhood context, and social networks. *City & Community*, *14*(3), 311–335. https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12124

Crocker, B., Chard, S., & Duncan, L. (2021). Composite vignettes of challenges faced by Canadian collegiate student-athletes negotiating the demands of university life. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *55*, Article 101937. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.101937

Custers, G., & Engbersen, G. (2022). Linking social capital and organizational ties: How different types of neighborhood organizations broker resources for the urban poor. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *46*(10), 1992–2008. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2137032

Dahlberg, L. (2020). Ageing in a changing place: A qualitative study of neighbourhood exclusion. *Ageing & Society*, *40*(10), 2238–2256. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X1900045X

Deboosere, P., Eggerickx, T., Van Hecke, E., & Wayens, B. (2009). The population of Brussels: A demographic overview. *Brussels Studies*. https://doi.org/10.4000/brussels.891

De Decker, P. (2023). *Space as capital: Or why geography matters for ageing*. Preprints. https://doi.org/ 10.20944/preprints202304.0463.v1

De Donder, L., De Witte, N., Buffel, T., Dury, S., & Verté, D. (2012). Social capital and feelings of unsafety in later life: A study on the influence of social networks, place attachment, and civic participation on perceived safety in Belgium. *Research on Aging*, *34*(4), 425–448. https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027511433879

De Donder, L., Smetcoren, A.-S., Schols, J. M. G. A., van der Vorst, A., Dierckx, E., & D-SCOPE Consortium. (2019). Critical reflections on the blind sides of frailty in later

life. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *49*, 66–73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2019.100787

De Donder, L., Stegen, H., & Hoens, S. (2024). Caring neighbourhoods in Belgium: Lessons learned on the development, implementation and evaluation of 35 caring neighbourhood projects. *Palliative Care and Social Practice*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1177/26323524241246533

Dierckx de Casterlé, B., De Vliegher, K., Gastmans, C., & Mertens, E. (2021). Complex qualitative data analysis: Lessons learned from the experiences with the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven. *Qualitative Health Research*, *31*(6), 1083–1093. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320966981

Dierckx de Casterlé, B., Gastmans, C., Bryon, E., & Denier, Y. (2012). QUAGOL: A guide for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, *49*(3), 360–371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2011. 09.012

Dikmans, B., & Chacur, K. (2024). Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for ageing and childhood research. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking ages: A dialogue between ageing and childhood research* (pp. 49–65). Routledge.

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Older people living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In R. Serrat (Ed.), *Civic engagement in later life* (pp. 192–208). Bristol University Press.

Duppen, D., Lambotte, D., Dury, S., Smetcoren, A.-S., Pan, H., De Donder, L., & D-SCOPE Consortium. (2020). Social participation in the daily lives of frail older adults: Types of participation and influencing factors. *The Journals of Gerontology*: *Series B*, *75*(9), 2062–2071. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbz045

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Pan, H., Principi, A., Smetcoren, A.-S., Perek-Białas, J., & De Donder, L. (2023). Helping behavior of older adults during the early Covid-19 lockdown in Belgium. *Research on Aging*, *45*(1), 8–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221105231

Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(1), 54–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105

Finlay, J., Cannon, M., Meltzer, G., & Yeh, J. (2024). Aging in third spaces. In M. P. Cutchin & G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 221–239). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Fisher, B., & Tronto, J. (1990). Toward a feminist theory of caring. In E. Abel & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Circles of care* (pp. 36–54). SUNY Press.

Fontes, C., & Cordeiro, G. I. (2023). Portraying urban change in Alfama (Lisbon): How local socio-spatial practices shape heritage. *Urban Planning*, *8*(1), 110–120. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i1.6073

Gardner, P. J. (2011). Natural neighborhood networks—Important social networks in the lives of older adults aging in place. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *25*(3), 263–271. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2011.03.007

Golant, S. M. (2015). Residential normalcy and the enriched coping repertoires of s uccessfully aging older adults. *The Gerontologist*, *55*(1), 70–82. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu036

Gott, M., Wiles, J., Morgan, T., Williams, L., Morgan, K., Black, S., Koh, A., Fanueli, E., Xu, J., Goodwin, H., Pilimatalawwe, D., & Moeke-Maxwell, T. (2024). Older people's contributions during the Covid-19 pandemic response. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, *36*(6), 1396–1416. https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2384322

Hagestad, G. O., & Dykstra, P. (2016). Structuration of the life course: Some neglected aspects. In M. J. Shanahan, J. T. Mortimer, & M. K. Johnson (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 131–157). Springer.

Halegoua, G. R., & Johnson, B. J. (2021). Seeing like a neighbor: Rethinking neighborhoods as service-oriented communities. *Urban Affairs Review*, *57*(6), 1730–1758. https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087420924759

Hampton, K. N., & Wellman, B. (2018). Lost and saved…again: The moral panic about the loss of community takes hold of social media. *Contemporary Sociology*, *47*(6), 643–651. https://doi.org/10.1177/009430611 8805415

Hand, C., Rudman, D. L., Huot, S., Pack, R., & Gilliland, J. (2020). Enacting agency: Exploring how older adults shape their neighbourhoods. *Ageing & Society*, *40*(3), 565–583. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X 18001150

Holmes, A. G. D. (2020). Researcher positionality: A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research — A new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, *8*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/ 10.34293/education.v8i4.3232

Karunamuni, N., Imayama, I., & Dharshini, G. (2021). Pathways to well-being: Untangling the causal relationships among biopsychosocial variables. *Social Science & Medicine*, *272*, Article 112846. https:// doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.112846

Knight, R. L., Mackintosh, K. A., Hudson, J., Shelley, J., Saynor, Z. L., & McNarry, M. A. (2023). Battling the unknown: Using composite vignettes to portray lived experiences of Covid-19 and long-Covid. *PLoS ONE*, *18*(4), Article e0284710. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284710

Kurtenbach, S. (2024). Neighbourhoods and social cohesion: Why neighbourhoods still matter. *Built Environment*, *50*(1), 73–94. https://doi.org/10.2148/benv.50.1.73

Lambotte, D., Kardol, M. J. M., Schoenmakers, B., Fret, B., Smetcoren, A.-S., De Roeck, E.E., Van der Elst, M., De Donder, L., & D-SCOPE Consortium. (2018). Relational aspects of mastery for frail, older adults: The role of informal caregivers in the care process. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, *27*, 632–641. https:// doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12676

Lau, U., Durrheim, K., & Young, L. S. (2021). Place detachment and the psychology of nonbelonging: Lessons from Diepsloot township. In C. M. Raymond, L. C. Manzo, D. R. Williams, A. Di Masso, & T. Von Wirth (Eds.), *Changing senses of place: Navigating global challenges* (pp. 103–115). Cambridge University Press.

Lecovich, E. (2014). Aging in place: From theory to practice. *Anthropological Notebooks*, *20*(1), 21–33. http://www.drustvo-antropologov.si/AN/PDF/2014_1/Anthropological_Notebooks_XX_1_lecovich.pdf

Lees, L., Annunziata, S., & Rivas-Alonso, C. (2018). Resisting planetary gentrification: The value of survivability in the fight to stay put. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *108*(2), 346–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1365587

Lekkas, P., Paquet, C., Howard, N. J., & Daniel, M. (2017). Illuminating the lifecourse of place in the longitudinal study of neighbourhoods and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, *177*, 239–247. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.09.025

Lewis, C., Philipson, C., Yarker, S., & Lang, L. (2023). *Covid-19, inequality and older people: Everyday life during the pandemic*. Bristol University Press; Policy Press.

Mahbubur, R. M., & Mandarano, L. A. (2021). Using photovoice and emotional maps to understand transitional urban neighborhoods. *Cities*, *118*, Article 103353. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103353

Martinez, I. L., Crooks, D., Kim, K. S., & Tanner, E. (2011). Invisible civic engagement among older adults: Valuing the contributions of informal volunteering. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, *26*, 23–37. https://doi. org/10.1007/s10823-011-9137-y

Oswald, F., Wahl, H.-W., Wanka, A., & Chaudhury, H. (2024). Theorizing place and aging: Enduring and novel issues in environmental gerontology. In M. P. Cutchin & G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 37–60). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Phillipson, C. (2007). The 'elected' and the 'excluded': Sociological perspectives on the experience of place and community in old age. *Ageing & Society*, *27*(3), 321–342. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005629

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster. Rowles, G. (1983). Place and identity in old age: Observations from Appalachia. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *3*(4), 299–313. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(83)80033-4

Ruonavaara, H. (2022). The anatomy of neighbour relations. *Sociological Research Online*, *27*(2), 379–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804211012708

Rutherford, A. C., Bu, F., Dawson, A., & McCall, V. (2019). *Literature review to inform the development of Scotland's Volunteering Outcomes Framework: People, communities and places*. Scottish Government. https://www.storre.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/31598/1/literature-review-inform-development- scotlands-volunteering-outcomes-framework.pdf

Scharf, T., Phillipson, C., & Smith, A. E. (2005). Social exclusion of older people in deprived urban communities of England. *European Journal of Ageing*, *2*, 76–87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-005-0025-6

Seifert, A. (2020). Day-to-day contact and help among neighbors measured in the natural environment. *Innovation in Aging*, *4*(2), Article igaa009. https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaa009

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., & Villar, F. (2021). Mapping civic engagement in later life: A scoping review of gerontological definitions and typology proposal. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *33*, 615–626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00346-6

Sharifian, N., Sol, K., Zahodne, L. B., & Antonucci, T. C. (2022). Social relationships and adaptation in later life. *Comprehensive Clinical Psychology*, *7*, 52–72. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818697-8.00016-9

Smith, A. E. (2009). *Ageing in urban neighbourhoods: Place attachment and social exclusion*. Bristol University Press; Policy Press.

Smith, R. J., Lehning, A. J., & Kim, K. (2018). Aging in place in gentrifying neighborhoods: Implications for physical and mental health. *The Gerontologist*, *58*(1) 26–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx105

Söderström, J. (2020). Life diagrams: A methodological and analytical tool for accessing life histories. *Qualitative Research*, *20*(1), 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118819068

Stewart, K., Hand, C., Rudman, D., McGrath, C., McFarland, J., Gilliland, J., & Kinghorn, W. (2024). Invisible, unrecognised and undervalued: Examining stories of unpaid work performed by older adults in their local neighbourhoods. *Ageing & Society*, *44*(9), 2038–2064. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2200126X

Sýkora, J., Horňáková, M., Visser, K., & Bolt, G. (2023). 'It is natural': Sustained place attachment of long-term residents in a gentrifying Prague neighbourhood. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *24*(10), 1941–1959. https:// doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2115534

Taei, A., Jönson, H., & Granbom, M. (2023). Crime, disorder, and territorial stigmatization: Older adults living in deprived neighborhoods. *The Gerontologist*, *63*(5), 910–919. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac159

Tanskanen, A. O., Hämäläinen, H., Arpino, B., & Danielsbacka, M. (2024). Prosocial activity in later life: Are informal help and care associated with volunteering and charity? *Ageing & Society*, *44*(7), 1645–1680. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X22001015

Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. NYU Press.

Versey, H. S. (2018). A tale of two Harlems: Gentrification, social capital, and implications for aging in place. *Social Science & Medicine*, *214*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.07.024

Volckaert, E., Schillebeeckx, E., & De Dekker, P. (2021). Beyond nostalgia: Older people's perspectives on informal care in rural Flanders. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 87, 444–454. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud. 2020.07.006

Walsh, K., O'Shea, E., Scharf, T., & Murray, M. (2012). Ageing in changing community contexts: Cross-border perspectives from rural Ireland and Northern Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 28(4), 347–357. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2012.01.012

Wanka, A. (2018). Disengagement as withdrawal from public space: Rethinking the relation between place attachment, place appropriation, and identity-building among older adults. *The Gerontologist*, 58(1), 130–139. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx081

Wild, K., Wiles, J., & Allen, R. (2013). Resilience: Thoughts on the value of the concept for critical gerontology. *Ageing & Society*, 33(1), 137–158. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X11001073

Wilson, J., & Musick, M. (1997). Who cares? Toward an integrated theory of volunteer work. *American Sociological Review*, 62(5), 694–713. https://doi.org/10.2307/2657355

Yarker, S. (2019). Social infrastructure: How shared spaces make communities work. *The University of Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing*.

https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/sites/default/files/Social%20Infrastructure%20Report.pdf

Yarker, S. (2022). *Creating spaces for an ageing society: The role of critical social infrastructure* (1st ed.). Emerald Publishing.

PART 4:

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Chapter 7:
Older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods

Published in:

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Older people in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 192-208). Bristol University Press.

Chapter 7:
Older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods

Abstract

Key features and implications of civic engagement within the context of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods have typically been overlooked in aging research. Drawing on insights from a range of studies conducted on either the civic engagement of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods or research engaging with theoretical debates on issues of the environment, the life course or exclusion, this chapter aims to provide a conceptual reflection on three detected gaps in the literature. First, environmental perspectives such as interactional, transactional and co-constitutional theorizations on place and contexts of aging are explored. Second, life-course perspectives through life-course theory, cumulative disadvantage, intersectional life-course theory and life course of place are examined. Third, exclusion-based approaches including political economy, Lefebvre's 'the right to the city' and spatial justice theory are considered. Afterwards, the intersections of the three different theoretical paradigms are discussed with regard to civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. The principal aim is to inspire the rethinking of civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods from an intersection of viewpoints. The chapter concludes by identifying possible avenues for future research for the understanding of civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Introduction

Gerontologists increasingly recognize the rising spatial disparities between the affluent and the less privileged in urban environments, creating uneven opportunities for aging well in place (Finlay, Gaugler and Kane, 2020). The recognition of the challenges of aging in cities has shifted gerontological attention towards exploring diverse topics including active and/or healthy aging (Bosch-Meda, 2021; WHO, 2023), life satisfaction (Au et al, 2020), loneliness (Scharf and De Jong Gierveld, 2008), caring neighborhoods

(Smetcoren et al, 2018), well-being (Oswald and Konopik, 2015) and social exclusion (Scharf, Philipson and Smith, 2005; Walsh, 2017). As civic engagement is acknowledged as an important dimension of social exclusion in later life (Walsh, Scharf and Keating, 2017), the growing spatial divide in cities makes studying the civic exclusion of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods highly relevant. As such, this chapter's aim is to provide a theoretical contribution to the exploration of civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Nowadays, more than half of the global population lives in cities (UN Habitat, 2022). In OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, persons aged 65 and older comprise approximately one-fifth of the population share in urban environments (OECD, 2021). Cities can offer advantages for older people such as specialized medical care and leisure opportunities. Ultimately, however, they are designed to cater to a younger, working-age population, which creates challenges for older people, such as urban regeneration, population changes and pollution (Buffel, Handler and Phillipson, 2018; Buffel and Phillipson, 2023). To promote a better fit between older people and urban environments, the WHO (World Health Organization) introduced the concept of age-friendly cities and communities in 2007.

Nevertheless, despite growing research on older urban dwellers, not enough attention has been given to older people residing in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, who are more likely to be negatively affected by adverse neighborhood change (Maciel and Moura, 2023). These neighborhood changes encompass, among others, a rising low-income population, reduced social ties and the decline of vital physical and community assets, such as a decreasing voluntary sector (Buffel et al, 2023; Townsend, Chen Wuthrich, 2021). In short, older people residing in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are at considerable risk of social and spatial exclusion in various domains, including civic engagement (Scharf, Philipson and Smith, 2005; Prattley et al, 2020).

This study does not focus on the antecedents or the interrelations between the different dimensions of civic engagement in later life. For those interested in this, other studies

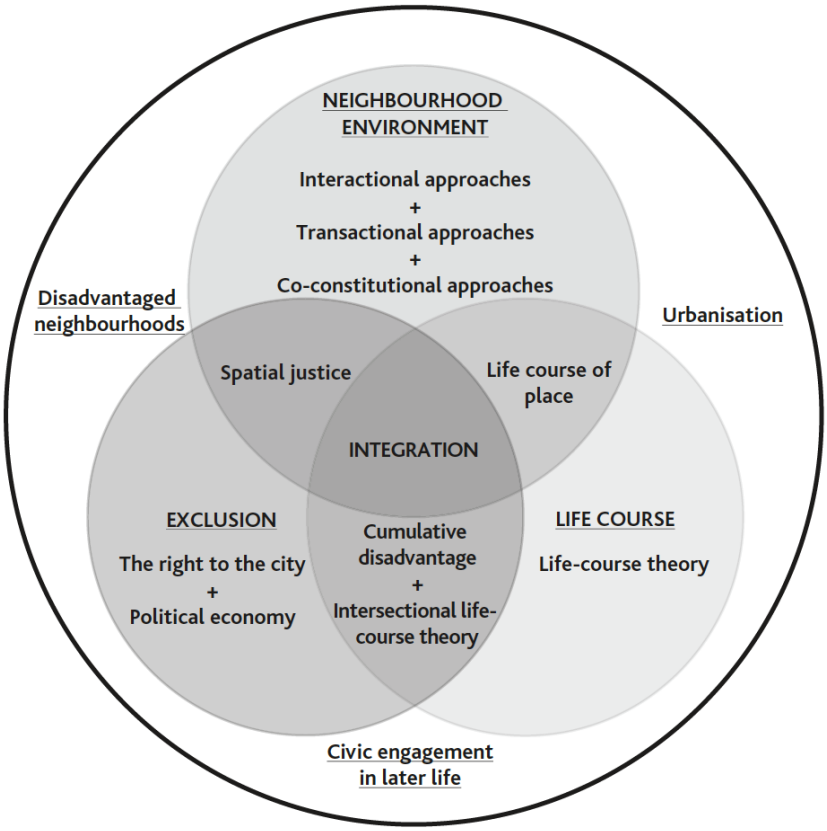
focus on, for instance, the multidimensional characteristics of civic engagement in later life (Serrat, 2025) or its multi-level features (Vercauteren, Nyqvist and Näsman, 2025). This chapter provides theoretical reflections of three gaps in the literature on the civic engagement of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. First, studies generally exclude relevant community- or neighborhood-level features (Lim and Laurence, 2015). The current literature mostly limits itself to individual- level predictors of participation, such as encouragement from peers, education level or financial situation (for example, Martinez et al, 2011; Liljas et al, 2017). Second, studies mostly abstain from exploring how civic exclusion takes shape during the life course in marginalized contexts (Torres, 2021; Torres and Serrat, 2025). Third, exclusion-based perspectives that consider resistance towards structural forces of exclusion are generally overlooked. As a result, research often ignores how older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods might also engage in, for instance, strong local networks or informal support, showing resilience to adversity (Padeiro et al, 2022). In what follows, civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods will be reconsidered from the viewpoint of three different theoretical paradigms that dialogue with the key omissions mentioned above (the disregard of community-level or neighborhood features, the lack of a life-course perspective and the inattention to resistance to structural exclusion). These perspectives are:

- Environmental perspectives such as interactional, transactional and co-constitutional theorizations on place and contexts of aging (Oswald et al, 2024) that argue that disadvantage is embedded, experienced and reshaped by older people in communities and social and physical environments such as neighborhoods.
- Life-course perspectives through life-course theory (Elder, 1994), cumulative disadvantage (Crystal and Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003), intersectional life-course theory (Ferrer et al, 2017) and life course of place (Lekkas et al, 2017) that recognize that disadvantage changes through time.
- Exclusion-based approaches including political economy (Bourdieu, 1998; Phillipson, 2005), Lefebvre's (1968) 'the right to the city' and spatial justice theory

(Soja, 2010) that acknowledge exclusion as spatially and structurally produced, while equally recognizing citizens' right to resist.

The main objective is to encourage a reconsideration of civic engagement among older people residing in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods from an intersection of viewpoints. **Figure 7.1** represents a proposed integrated conceptual framework. The three overlapping perspectives are embedded in the wider debate on urbanization, disadvantaged neighborhoods and civic engagement in later life. These debates provide the lens through which each perspective is given substance. In what follows, each theoretical approach will be introduced separately, and afterwards, attention will be given to their intersections. In the end, future avenues for research on civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods will be outlined using the integrated conceptual framework.

Figure 7.1: Integrated conceptual framework for research on the civic engagement of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.



Environmental perspectives

Environmental factors are pivotal to consider when studying older people's civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. For cities, the prevailing view until the early 1970s was that urban environments were interchangeable contexts with measurable and well-defined features (Rossi, 2019). This technocratic view of cities is diametrically opposed to social- constructivist views that emphasize the construction of urban space through person-environment interactions (Andrews, Cutchin and Skinner, 2018). However, there is limited empirical data on how the physical design of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods relates either positively or negatively to experiences of aging (Strobl et al, 2016). Moreover, the term 'environment' is complex and can comprise a variety of dimensions. Examples are the social environment (for example, social networks and neighborhood cohesion; Duppen et al, 2019), the physical environment (for example, walkability or presence of litter; Domènech-Abella et al, 2020), the structural environment (for example, the presence of locations facilitating social interaction or 'third places'; Finlay et al, 2019) and the socio-cultural environment (for example, a history of valuing cultural and ethnic diversity among residents; Osborne et al, 2012).

In aging research, it is mainly environmental gerontology that has scrutinized the position of older people within their neighborhood environment. An evolution spanning three generations of environmental gerontologists that have theorized the connection between older people and their environment was initially observed by Wahl and Weisman (2003) and recently refined by Oswald et al (2024). A first generation of environmental gerontologists mainly approached the relation between persons and space as interactional, primarily focusing on the influence of the physical neighborhood environment (for example, Lawton, 1990; Stokols, 1996) on older people's lives. Due to its theoretical and empirical limitations, the interactional perspective was replaced by a transactional lens that dedicated itself to the combination of visible and experienced processes of person-environment exchange. This second generation paved the way for, for example, older people's adaptive coping strategies (for example, Golant, 2011, 2017). A transactional lens sees older people not only as passive recipients of

environmental pressures but also as involved actors who overcome obstacles and proactively shape their surroundings. For example, Wanka's (2018) work on older people's resistance towards adverse neighborhood changes in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Vienna is exemplary for the transactional approach. She shows how older residents might be disadvantaged and disengaged, but also resistant and rebellious.

Today, a third generation of scholars advocates a co-constitutional perspective that acknowledges that older people are engaged in a continuous process of complex definition and redefinition with their environment (Oswald et al, 2024). A co-constitutional perspective is inspired by research fields outside of environmental gerontology, such as the need for understanding the interplay between multi-level environmental influences and individual autonomy, but also the importance of materiality for aging in place. Examples of theoretic research departing from a co-constitutional approach are the framework of community gerontology by Greenfield et al (2019) and Gallistl and Wanka's work on material gerontology (2023).

In the literature on civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, interactional and transactional perspectives are represented by studies that include neighborhood-level challenges, often framed as 'a lack of ', a lack of community groups, public transportation, or opportunities for social interaction. These studies show how neighborhood barriers are experienced and negatively shape civic engagement (for example, Dury et al, 2016) or how they are at times even overcome (for example, Bezzo and Jeannet, 2023). Gradually, research includes older residents as co-researchers in community-based or participatory research programs, aimed at rethinking the connection between civic engagement, place and aging in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (for example, Fang et al, 2016). Future research on civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods should thus take the environment more into account, and a co-constitutional approach seems to be the most promising and innovative way to achieve this.

Life-course theory

We cannot understand older people today if we overlook their life stories. Through life-course research, an individual's life is considered as embedded in wider societal and historical forces (Van Regenmortel et al, 2021). A life- course approach especially tells us more about how lives are unevenly and differentially experienced in different social contexts (Walsh et al, 2020). Therefore, a life-course perspective is needed if we want to understand the civic engagement of older residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Sociological views of the life course emphasize the impact of life events and transitions (such as retirement, bereavement, or illness) as well as life trajectories on personal development (Switsers et al, 2023; Torres and Serrat, 2025).

One of the most influential models in life-course research is the one of Elder (1994) which recognizes the social forces that shape individuals' life courses, distinguishing between four central themes: (1) the impact of historical change on the life course, which explores how individuals born in different years experience distinct historical contexts that shape the opportunities and challenges they encounter throughout their lives, (2) the temporality of social meanings of age, which analyzes how the social significance of age evolves over time, (3) the interdependence of human lives, focusing on how lives interact with each other during the life course and (4) individual agency, acknowledging that individuals intentionally make decisions that shape their life trajectories.

Studies on civic engagement in later life are predominantly cross-sectional. They focus on personal reasons why older people engage in civic activities, such as learning more, feeling better about oneself, or improving the quality of life in their neighborhoods (Dury, 2018). Additionally, they examine short-term outcomes at the micro level, such as improved mental or physical health (Luhr, Pavlova and Luhmann, 2022). However, the impact of the life course on shaping civic engagement in later life is often neglected (Serrat et al, 2020; Torres and Serrat, 2025). In addition, more and more studies are beginning to understand the relationship between life-course neighborhood disadvantage and well-being in adulthood (for example, Jivraj et al, 2021). Nevertheless,

the civic engagement of older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods throughout the life course remains overlooked, as research on civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods also typically limits itself to snapshots of a given moment in time (for example, Martinez et al, 2011; Gele and Harsløf, 2012). A life-course perspective, then, can provide valuable insight into the temporal dynamics of aging in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, how life events and transitions shape older residents' civic activities and how this civic engagement shapes older residents' lives.

Exclusion and 'the right to the city'

Older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods can oppose adverse neighborhood change through their civic engagement as active citizens. Debates within political economy emphasize how institutions and neoliberal ideology enhance socio-economic inequality, thereby silencing the political voice of citizens (Doheny and Jones, 2021). While Bourdieu (1998) wrote about the different ways that state and market influences negatively shape people's lives, Phillipson (2005) exposed how macro-level pressures contribute to later-life inequality. Nevertheless, exclusion is not just experienced passively. On the contrary, it is through their agency that older people actively resist structural pressures of exclusion that are embedded in broader historical and social circumstances (Elder and Johnson, 2003).

In the context of cities, Lefebvre (1968) recognized the diversity and inequality of urban spaces and advocated for the social emancipation of marginalized urban groups. His notion of 'the right to the city' became a foundational concept for critical urban thinkers. It posed a radical challenge to how citizenship and ownership of urban spaces were until then defined. According to this view, citizenship should be based on inhabitance of a city or neighborhood, rather than on one's formal nation-state membership. Urban residents have a claim to their neighborhoods, which is represented accordingly by the right to, first, appropriate urban space and, second, actively participate in its production (Purcell, 2003). In the case of later life, the 'right to the city' approach emphasizes the

synergy between local actors, including older residents themselves, for creating neighborhoods where older people age well. Joy (2020) calls this the 'right of cities', a view that recognizes that cities have rights too, namely the right to be governed in such a way that they become places that foster older inhabitants' well-being, which encompasses their civic engagement.

For Walsh, Scharf and Keating (2017), civic exclusion limits the ability of older people to fully exercise their civic rights. However, Riccardi et al (2023) show how, in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, community interventions, such as institutional funding and stakeholder partnerships, can increase residents' engagement in their communities. But stakeholder partnerships are not easily obtained. In Belgium, for example, the needs of older people in their neighborhoods are still overlooked and municipalities often have little knowledge of the issues facing older people (De Donder et al, 2014). In disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, studies show that the institutional frameworks for local empowerment that spur older residents' civic engagement are generally absent (for example, Martinez et al, 2011). As a result, older residents' civic engagement is often informal and mainly off the radar. This hinders various forms of formal civic engagement. It is thus important to look at civic engagement, in its multiple dimensions (Serrat, 2025), as a feature of social life that should be encouraged to promote the empowerment of older people as active citizens in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

The intersection of the three approaches

This section provides an analysis of how the three theoretical approaches mentioned in **Figure 7.1** overlap to form new angles for looking at the civic engagement of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, including the intersection of the neighborhood environment and the life course (life course of place); the life course and exclusion ([1] intersectional life-course theory and [2] cumulative disadvantage); and exclusion and the neighborhood environment (spatial justice).

Neighborhood environment and the life course: the life course of place

At the junction between neighborhood environment and the life course, the life course of place can be found (Lekkas et al, 2017; Walsh, 2024). Neighborhoods are not set in stone, and they constantly adapt to pressures from in- and outside, for instance through regeneration and in- and out- migration (Buffel and Phillipson, 2019). Scholars, which include third-generation scholars in environmental gerontology experimenting with life-course theory, therefore increasingly argue for exploring how places of aging change over time (Lewis and Buffel, 2020), commonly represented as the "life course of place" (Lekkas et al, 2017). This perspective engages with community narratives of neighborhood transitions and speculations of what the neighborhood will look like in the future (for example, Cope et al, 2019). In another example, Walsh (2024) argues that the way older people interact with their surroundings shapes how life transitions affect them and how they experience their neighborhoods throughout their lives. The "life course of place" consequently includes considering how life-course changes alter older residents' connection to their neighborhood environment and how the environment itself impacts these transitions.

Applying a "life course of place" approach for studying older people's civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods will therefore provide researchers with a better understanding of how space and time interact with features of civic exclusion in the lives of older residents. Studies focusing on the life course of places have so far highlighted social exclusion (Walsh, 2024) and issues of aging in place (Lekkas et al, 2017), but have so far failed to consider how the lives of older people are co-constitutionally intertwined and mutually shaped through civic activities. The "life course of place" approach can be used as a new angle to respond to this gap. As an example, Dikmans et al (2025) argue that older residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods characterized by adverse changes still find ways of informally helping each other, with an important role for neighborhood organizations in supporting civic engagement. New angles that could be highlighted by considering a "life course of place" perspective thus have to do with how older residents

change their neighborhoods through their civic engagement and how, simultaneously, neighborhood changes influence older residents' civic engagement.

Life course and exclusion (1): intersectional life-course theory

At the first intersection of life-course theory and exclusion-based perspectives, we find intersectional life-course theory. Intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw in the late 1980s to conceptualize how systems of interlocking oppressions interact to disempower and suppress the active citizenship of marginalized groups (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). Ferrer et al (2017) suggest adopting an intersectional life-course perspective to capture the diverse narratives of older people through time and to understand how people age differently. Combined socio-economic, psychological, or physical differences lead to diverse and complex forms of oppression that change throughout older people's lives (Holman and Walker, 2021). For example, older women may face distinct life-course challenges to aging well in place compared to older men. Serrat and Villar (2020) have demonstrated this in relation to the political engagement of older men and women in Spain, as life-course transitions in the family domain (for example, partnering, parenthood, divorce, widowhood and taking care of relatives) were far more frequent for older women, influencing their political engagement. Moreover, life transitions in general are differentially experienced by older men and women. However, as Ågård and Torres (2025) show, older women are a heterogeneous group and those with a migrant background face a combination of gender-, migration- and age-based struggles.

In disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, often marked by socio-cultural and linguistic diversity, life trajectories can differentially shape the civic engagement of minoritized groups of older people, often limiting their agency. This equally affects their ability to influence community life (Finlay, Gaugler and Kane, 2020). Researchers have until now not yet fully considered the differential and complex life-course experiences of different groups of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and their civic engagement. Different structural barriers, such as a lack of respect, social disconnect and

community mistrust, pose obstacles to the civic engagement of different groups of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Parekh et al, 2018). Nevertheless, how these barriers change, adapt, or are reinforced through the life course has not yet been well documented. Applying an intersectional life-course theoretical framework is a fruitful way of exploring this.

Life course and exclusion (2): cumulative disadvantage

Another approach at the intersection of life course and exclusion is cumulative disadvantage. Cumulative disadvantage gained ground in the 1990s and early 2000s, arguing that inequalities become more and more manifest as time passes (Crystal and Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003). Scharf et al (2002) already acknowledged that, for instance, poverty or poor health throughout the life course considerably increase the risk of exclusion in later life. More recently, evidence suggests that, in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, various indicators of disadvantage interact, especially as residents age and become more dependent on their neighborhood, making them more vulnerable to the negative effects of adverse neighborhood change (Granbom, Jönson and Kottorp, 2022). In cities, older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods often face multiple processes of exclusion throughout their lives (Hochstenbach, 2018). Nevertheless, despite scholars stressing the importance of understanding inequality and disadvantage in urban environments in later life at different points in time (Reyes, 2022), such studies are nearly non-existent.

Research on the cumulative effects of neighborhood disadvantage on civic engagement in later life throughout time is scarce but studies generally confirm the cumulative disadvantage theory. For example, Krause (2011) demonstrates how cumulative pressures and accumulated forms of disadvantage during the life course, and even through generations, shape older people's informal help in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Krause, 2011). A cumulative disadvantage lens will thus shed light on how accumulation of disadvantage throughout the life course fashions civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

Exclusion and the neighborhood environment: spatial justice

The notion of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) is of relevance for understanding the coming together of exclusion-based approaches and environmental theory. Spatial justice emphasizes 'the need for those most negatively affected by the urban condition to take greater control over the social production of urbanized space' (Soja, 2010, p 6). In the style of Lefebvre, spatial justice is concerned with the differential access of urban neighborhood residents to the social resources and advantages that the city provides (Soja, 2010). It advocates combatting inequality spatially to create inclusive and well-functioning neighborhood environments that promote a positive experience for everyone. Simultaneously, this perspective provides a framework for recognizing and empowering older users of neighborhood spaces (Joy, 2020). In the context of formal volunteering, Dury, Grinstheyn and Aartsen (2025) explain how organizations play a role in recruiting and retaining older volunteers, for instance through providing small stipends which can be particularly useful for engaging low-income older residents. The implication is that researchers should consider how neighborhood design is experienced and co-constituted through older resident's engagement, and how municipal, city or even state authorities can work together to foster 'the rights of cities' (Joy, 2020) with older residents and to promote inclusion in civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Spatial justice thus spurs gerontologists to explore unequal spatialized access to civic engagement opportunities in later life among older residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and to understand how these barriers might be overcome.

Conclusions

This chapter examines three theoretical approaches to investigate civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. These approaches are not isolated, but they overlap, leading to the emergence of new approaches where they converge (see **Figure 7.1**). Through this framework, the authors propose a rethinking of the civic engagement of older people in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Ideally, this spurs

gerontologists and researchers from other fields to consider: (1) how disadvantaged urban neighborhoods have a life course of their own that is defined by but also shapes the lives of its older neighborhood residents (through the "life course of place" [Lekkas et al, 2017; Walsh, 2024]); (2) how inequality accumulates over time and is experienced diversely through interlocking oppressions, as described by cumulative disadvantage (Crystal and Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003) and intersectional life-course theory (Ferrer et al, 2017); and (3) the uneven roots of disadvantage in urban geographies and how older people and local players can actively resist this rising spatial inequality (through spatial justice theory [Soja, 2010]). The authors of this contribution hope as such to have inspired those who are interested in fostering the empowerment of older people in research to innovatively rethink the conceptual nexus between aging in disadvantaged urban contexts and older residents' civic engagement.

Researchers could use this model to critically reflect on their work in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, civic engagement in later life is not just manifested at the personal level. There is a need to go beyond the micro representations of disadvantage and look at the different ways that environmental, life-course and structural exclusionary forces shape older residents' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. The three theoretical perspectives dialogue with each other and give important new insights and avenues for future explorations of civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban environments. Engaging with these perspectives from a gerontological point of view urges researchers to look at older urban dwellers as occupiers of space and, more importantly, as citizens who have a claim to their neighborhoods. As stated, an important role is reserved for local authorities, community professionals and neighborhood practitioners to respect and uphold the active application of this citizenship, which Joy (2020) calls 'the rights of cities'. To achieve this objective, it is therefore important for research to collaborate closely with these stakeholders and to strengthen so-called researcher-practitioner collaborations (Brun and Lund, 2010). To conclude, Alexander and Conrad (2023, p 13), while not specifically targeting older people, echo this chapter's final argument, as they underscore the pivotal part that institutions play in enhancing ownership of space through citizenship:

"We must see ourselves as Citizens – people who actively shape the world around us, who cultivate meaningful connections to their community and institutions, who can imagine a different and better life, who care and take responsibility, and who create opportunities for others to do the same. Crucially, our institutions must also see people as Citizens, and treat us as such. When they do, everything changes".

References

Ågård, P., & Torres, S. (2025). Older people with diverse migrant backgrounds. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 178-191). Bristol University Press.

Alexander, J. and Conrad, A. (2023) *Citizens*, Kingsbury upon Thames: Canbury Press Ltd.

Andrews, G.J., Cutchin, M.P. and Skinner, M.W. (2018) 'Space and place in geographical gerontology: Theoretical traditions, formations of hope', in M.W. Skinner, G.J. Andrews and M.P. Cutchin (eds) *Geographical Gerontology: Perspectives, Concepts, Approaches*, London and New York: Routledge, 11–28.

Au, A., Lai, D.W., Yip, H.M., Chan, S., Lai, S., Chaudhury, H. et al (2020) 'Sense of community mediating between age-friendly characteristics and life satisfaction of community-dwelling older adults', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11: 86.

Bezzo, F.B. and Jeannet, A.-M. (2023) 'Civic involvement in deprived communities: A longitudinal study of England', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 74: 837–57.

Bosch-Meda, J. (2021) 'Is the role of urban planning in promoting active ageing fully understood? A comparative review of international initiatives to develop age-friendly urban environments', *ACE: Architecture, City and Environment*, 16(47): 10337.

Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Acts of Resistance: Against the new Myths of our Time*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brun, C. and Lund, R. (2010) 'Real-time research: Decolonising research practices – or just another spectacle of researcher–practitioner collaboration?', *Development in Practice*, 20(7): 812–26.

Buffel, T. and Phillipson, C. (2019) 'Ageing in a gentrifying neighbourhood: Experiences of community change in later life', Sociology, 53(6): 987–1004. Buffel, T. and Phillipson, C. (2023) *Ageing in Place in Urban Environments: Critical Perspectives*, London and New York: Routledge.

Buffel, T., Handler, S. and Phillipson, C. (2018) *Age-friendly Cities and Communities*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Buffel, T., Yarker, S., Phillipson, C., Lang, L., Lewis, C. and Doran, P. (2023) 'Locked down by inequality: Older people and the COVID-19 pandemic', *Urban Studies*, 60(8): 1465– 82.

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K.W. and McCall, L. (2013) 'Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis', *Signs*, 38(4): 785–810.

Cope, M.R., Park, P.N., Jackson, J.E., Muirbrook K.A., Sanders, S.R. and Ward, C. et al (2019) 'Community as story and the dynamic nature of community: Perceptions, place, and narratives about change', *Social Sciences*, 8(2): 70.

Crystal, S. and Shea, D. (1990) 'Cumulative advantage, cumulative disadvantage, and inequality among elderly people', *The Gerontologist*, 30(4): 437–43.

Dannefer, D. (2003) 'Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the life course: Cross-fertilizing age and social science theory', T*he Journals of Gerontology. Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 58(6): S327–37.

De Donder, L., De Witte, N., Verté, D., Dury, S., Buffel, T., Smetcoren, A.-S. et al (2014) 'Developing evidence-based age-friendly policies: A participatory research project', in *Sage Research Methods Cases Part 1*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Dikmans, B., Serrat, R., Stegen, H., Vercauteren, T., De Donder, L., & Dury, S. (2025). "Life course of place": Older adults' social networks and informal help amidst urban change. *Urban Planning,* 10: 9909.

Doheny, S. and Jones, I.R. (2021) 'What's so critical about it? An analysis of critique within different strands of critical gerontology', *Ageing & Society*, 41(10): 2314–34.

Domènech-Abella, J., Mundó, J., Leonardi, M., Chatterji, S., Tobiasz- Adamczyk, B., Koskinen, S. et al (2020) 'Loneliness and depression among older European adults: The role of perceived neighborhood built environment', *Health & Place*, 62: 32479358.

Duppen, D., Van der Elst, M.C.J., Dury, S., Lambotte, D.F. and De Donder, L. (2019) 'The social environment's relationship with frailty: Evidence from existing studies', *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 38(1): 3–26.

Dury, S., Grinshteyn, E., & Aarsten, M. (2025). Older people's formal volunteering. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 90-107). Bristol University Press.

Dury, S. (2018) 'Dynamics in motivations and reasons to quit in a care bank: A qualitative study in Belgium', *European Journal of Ageing*, 15: 407–16.

Dury, S., Willems, J., De Witte, N., De Donder, L., Buffel, T. and Verté, D. (2016) 'Municipality and neighborhood influences on volunteering in later life', *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 35(6): 601–26.

Elder Jr., G.H. (1994) 'Time, human agency and social change: Perspectives on the life course', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1): 4–15.

Elder Jr., G.H. and Johnson, M.K. (2003) 'The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons, and new directions', in R. Settersen (ed) *Invitation to the Life Course: Towards new Understandings of later Life*, New York: Routledge, 49–81.

Fang, M.L, Woolrych, R., Sixsmith, J., Canham, S., Battersby, L. and Sixsmith, A. (2016) 'Place-making with older persons: Establishing sense- of-place through participatory community mapping workshops, *Social Science & Medicine*, 168: 223–9.

Ferrer, I., Grenier, A., Brotman, S. and Koehn, S. (2017) 'Understanding the experiences of racialized older people through an intersectional life course perspective', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 41: 10–17.

Finlay, J., Esposito, M., Kim, M.H., Gomez-Lopez, I. and Clarke, P. (2019) 'Closure of "third places"? Exploring potential consequences for collective health and wellbeing', *Health & Place*, 60: 102225.

Finlay, J.M., Gaugler, J.E. and Kane, R.L. (2020) 'Ageing in the margins: Expectations of and struggles for 'a good place to grow old' among low-income older Minnesotans', *Ageing & Society*, 40(4): 759–83.

Gallistl, V. and Wanka, A. (2023) 'Spacetimematter of aging: The material temporalities of later life', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 67: 101182.

Gele, A.A. and Harsløf, I. (2012) 'Barriers and facilitators to civic engagement among elderly African immigrants in Oslo', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 14: 166–74.

Golant, S.M. (2011) 'The quest for residential normalcy by older adults: Relocation but one pathway', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 25: 193–205.

Golant, S.M. (2017) 'A theoretical model to explain the smart technology adoption behaviors of elder consumers (Elderadopt)', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 42: 56–73.

Granbom, M., Jönson, H. and Kottorp, A. (2022) 'Older adults living in disadvantaged areas: Protocol for a mixed methods baseline study on homes, quality of life, and participation in transitioning neighborhoods', *JMIR Research Protocols*, 11(10): e41255.

Greenfield, E.A., Black, K., Buffel, T. and Yeh, J. (2019) 'Community gerontology: A framework for research, policy, and practice on communities and aging', *The Gerontologist*, 59(5): 803–10.

Hochstenbach, C. (2018) 'The age dimensions of urban socio-spatial change', *Population, Space and Place*, 25(2): e2220.

Holman, D. and Walker, A. (2021) 'Understanding unequal ageing: Towards a synthesis of intersectionality and life course analyses', *European Journal of Ageing*, 18: 239–55.

Jivraj, S., Nicholas, O., Murray, E.T. and Norman, P. (2021) 'Life course neighbourhood deprivation and self-rated health: Does it matter where you lived in adolescence and do neighbourhood effects build up over life?', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18: 10311.

Joy, M. (2020) *The Right to an Age-Friendly City: Redistribution, Recognition, and Senior Citizen Rights in Urban Spaces*, Montreal and Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Krause, N. (2011) 'Neighborhood conditions and helping behavior in late life', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 31(1): 62–9.

Lawton, M.P. (1990) 'Residential environment and self-directedness among older people', *The American Psychologist*, 45: 638–40.

Lefebvre, H. (1968) 'Le droit à la ville', *Sociologie du Travail*, 10(4): 456–7.

Lekkas, P., Paquet, C., Howard, N.J. and Daniel, M. (2017) 'Illuminating the lifecourse of place in the longitudinal study of neighbourhoods and health', *Social Science & Medicine*, 177: 239–47.

Lewis, C. and Buffel, T. (2020) 'Aging in place and the places of aging: A longitudinal study', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 54: 100870.

Liljas, A.E.M., Walters, K., Jovicic, A., Ilife, S., Manthorpe, J. and Goodman, C. et al (2017) 'Strategies to improve engagement of 'hard to reach' older people in research on health promotion: A systematic review', *BMC Public Health*, 17: 349.

Lim, C. and Laurence, J. (2015) 'Doing good when times are bad: Volunteering behaviour in economic hard times', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 66(2): 319–44.

Luhr, M., Pavlova, M.K. and Luhmann, M. (2022) 'Nonpolitical versus political participation: longitudinal associations with mental health and social well-being in different age groups', *Social Indicators Research*, 159(3): 865–84.

Maciel, T.F. and Moura, L.B. (2023) 'Epistemological assumptions of age-friendly cities: A scoping review', *Acta Paulista de Enfermagem*, 36: eAPE00202.

Martinez, I.L., Crooks, D., Kim, K.S. and Tanner, E. (2011) 'Invisible civic engagement among older adults: Valuing the contributions of informal volunteering', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 26(1): 23–37.

OECD (2021) *Health at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD Publishing.

Osborne, K., Ziersch, A.M., Baum, F.E. and Gallaher, G. (2012) 'Australian aboriginal urban residents' satisfaction with living in their neighbourhood: Perceptions of the neighbourhood socio-cultural environment and individual socio-demographic factors', *Urban Studies*, 49(11): 2459–77.

Oswald, F. and Konopik, N. (2015) 'Bedeutung von außerhäuslichen Aktivitäten, Nachbarschaft und Stadtteilidentifikation für das Wohlbefinden im Alter', *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie*, 48: 401–7.

Oswald, F., Wahl, H.-W., Wanka, A. and Chaudhury, H. (2024) 'Theorizing place and aging: Enduring and novel issues in environmental gerontology', in M.P. Cutchin and G.D. Rowles (eds) *Handbook of Aging and Place*, London: Edward Elgar.

Padeiro, M., de São José, J., Amado, C., Sousa, L., Roma Oliveira, C. and Esteves, A. (2022) 'Neighborhood attributes and well-being among older adults in urban areas: A mixed-methods systematic review', *Research on Aging*, 44(5–6): 351–68.

Parekh, R., Maleku, A., Fields, N., Adorno, G., Schuman, D. and Felderhoff, B. (2018) 'Pathways to age-friendly communities in diverse urban neighborhoods: Do social capital and social cohesion matter?', *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 61(5): 492–512.

Phillipson, C. (2005) 'The political economy of old age', in M.L. Johnson, V.L. Bengtson, P.G. Coleman and T.B.L. Kirkwood (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 502–9.

Prattley, J., Buffel, T., Marshall, A. and Nazroo, J. (2020) 'Area effects on the level and development of social exclusion in later life', *Social Science & Medicine*, 246: 112722.

Purcell, M. (2003) 'Citizenship and the right to the global city: Reimagining the capitalist world order', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(3): 564–90.

Reyes, L. (2022) 'Experiences of civic participation among older African American and Latinx immigrant adults in the context of an ageist and racist society', *Research on Aging*, 45(1): 92–103.

Riccardi, M.T., Pettinicchio, V., Di Pumpo, M., Gerardo, A., Cesare, N.M. and Roberta, M. (2023) 'Community-based participatory research to engage disadvantaged communities: Levels of engagement reached and how to increase it. A systematic review', *Health Policy*, 137: 104905.

Rossi, U. (2019) 'Critical Urban Theory', in A. Orum (ed) *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., pp 1–11.

Scharf, T. and de Jong Gierveld, J. (2008) 'Loneliness in urban neighbourhoods: an Anglo-Dutch comparison', *European Journal of Ageing*, 5(2): 103–15.

Scharf, T., Philipson, C. and Smith, A.E. (2005) 'Social exclusion of older people in deprived urban communities of England', *European Journal of Ageing*, 2: 76–87.

Scharf, T., Smith, A.E. and Kingston, P. (2002) *Growing Older in Socially Deprived Areas: Social Exclusion in Later Life*, London: Help the Aged.

Serrat, R. (2025). A conceptual Framework to understand civic Engagement in later Life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 3-19). Bristol University Press.

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., Villar, F. and Gómez, C. (2020) 'Fifty-five years of research into older people's civic participation: Recent trends, future directions', *The Gerontologist*, 60(1): e38–e51.

Smetcoren, A.-S., De Donder, L., Duppen, D., De Witte, N., Vanmechelen, O. and Verté, D. (2018) 'Towards an active caring community in Brussels' in T. Buffel, S. Handles and C. Phillipson (eds) *Age-Friendly Communities: A Global Perspective*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp 97–118.

Soja, E.W. (2010) Seeking Spatial Justice, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Stokols, D. (1996) 'Translating social ecological theory into guidelines for community health promotion', *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 10(4): 282–98.

Strobl, R., Maier, W., Ludyga, A., Mielck, A. and Grill, E. (2016) 'Relevance of community structures and neighbourhood characteristics for participation of older adults: A qualitative study', *Quality of Life Research*, 25: 143–52.

Switsers, L., Stegen, H., Dierckx, E., Heylen, L., Dury, S. and De Donder, L. (2023) 'Life stories from lonely older adults: The role of precipitating events and coping strategies throughout the lifecourse', *Ageing & Society*, 1–24.

Torres, S., & Serrat, R. (2025). A life-course approach to civic engagement in later life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 40-56). Bristol University Press.

Torres, S. (2021) 'Introduction: Framing civic exclusion', in K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. van Regenmortel and A. Wanka (eds) *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives*, Cham: Springer, pp 239–43.

Townsend, B.G., Chen, J.T. and Wuthrich, V.M. (2021) 'Barriers and facilitators to social participation in older adults: A systematic literature review', *Clinical Gerontologist*, 44(4): 359–80.

UN Habitat (2022) *World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities*, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Nairobi: Headquarters UN Habitat.

Van Regenmortel, S., Smetcoren, A.-S., Marsillas, S., Lambotte, D., Fret, B. and De Donder, L. (2021) 'Exploring underexposed stories: The experienced lifecourse of financially excluded older adults', *Ageing & Society*, 41(4): 724–45.

Vercauteren, T., Nyqvist, F., & Näsman, M. (2025). What characterises civic engagement in later life? Micro-, meso- and macro-level influences. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 20-39). Bristol University Press.

Wahl, H.-W. and Weisman, G.D. (2003) 'Environmental gerontology at the beginning of the new millennium: Reflections on its historical, empirical, and theoretical development', *The Gerontologist*, 43(5): 616–27.

Walsh, K. (2017) 'Ageing in diverse urban neighbourhoods: Social exclusion and life-course relationships with place', *Age and Ageing*, 46(3): iii1–iii12.

Walsh, K. (2024) 'Life course perspectives on place', in M.P. Cutchin and G.D. Rowles (eds) *Handbook on Aging and Place*, London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 61–81.

Walsh, K., O'Shea, E. and Scharf, T. (2020) 'Rural old-age social exclusion: A conceptual framework on mediators of exclusion across the lifecourse', *Ageing & Society*, 40(11): 2311–37.

Walsh, K., Scharf, T. and Keating, N. (2017) 'Social exclusion of older persons: A scoping review and conceptual framework', *European Journal of Aging*, 14(81).

Wanka, A. (2018) 'Disengagement as withdrawal from public space: Rethinking the relation between place attachment, place appropriation, and identity- building among older adults', *The Gerontologist*, 58(1): 130–9.

World Health Organization (2023) *National Programmes for Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A Guide*, Geneva: WHO Press.

Chapter 8:
General discussion

Chapter 8:
General discussion

In this dissertation, I have investigated how civic engagement in later life relates to the places older adults make use of, through employing a life-course perspective. My research aim was twofold: **1)** to explore older adults' diverse experiences of civic engagement in later life (focusing on the experiences of older migrants and older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods) and, as such, broaden our understanding of civic engagement in later life beyond dominant groups and contexts, and **2)** to understand the civic engagement of older adults across time and place (focusing on both individual and neighborhood life courses).

Throughout the dissertation, and its separate chapters, I have aimed to respond to the four knowledge gaps as outlined in the general introduction (**Chapter 1**). These knowledge gaps are: **1) conceptual breadth**, which relates to the need for a broader rethinking of civic engagement in later life, namely through a multidimensional understanding of the term, **2) neighborhood dynamics**, which concerns the significance of studying the relationship between the neighborhood environment and civic engagement in later life as going both ways, **3) diverse populations**, which connects to how civic engagement is understood and experienced differently across diverse groups of older adults, and **4) life-course and place trajectories**, which involves our understanding of how places change through time and how this change is deeply intertwined with civic engagement in later life.

Each of these themes returns in one way or another in the five chapters. In this discussion, I hope to bring these different chapters together, and present some overarching insights. The structure of the general discussion is as follows: First, I will summarize the key messages of the dissertation's findings. Second, I will consider some "lessons learned" through methodological, theoretical and ethical reflections. Third, limitations will be acknowledged and directions for future research will be presented. Fourth, recommendations for policy and practice will be proposed.

1. Key messages

Two key take-away messages are detailed below that answer the different knowledge gaps. First, we need to rethink our understanding of civic engagement in later life (which is predominantly a response to the first research aim and knowledge gap **1** and **3: conceptual breadth** and **diverse populations**). Second, places and older adults' civic engagement are interwoven through time (which for a big part connects to the second research aim and knowledge gap **2** and **4: neighborhood dynamics** and **life-course and place trajectories**).

1.1. We need to rethink our understanding of civic engagement in later life

Conceptually speaking, definitions of civic engagement in later life have taken multiple dimensions of the term into account (e.g., Martinson & Minkler, 2006; McBride et al., 2006; Serrat et al., 2022). Nevertheless, empirical studies on civic engagement in later life generally tend to focus on formal dimensions, and most often on formal volunteering (Burr et al., 2018; Tangchonlatip et al., 2019). I have aimed to challenge this narrow focus in two ways, both by examining participants' actual practices (e.g., in what kinds of civic activities do participants engage?) and by alluding to their interpretations and understandings of the term civic engagement (e.g., what might the participants of this study mean when they think of the term?).

The findings indicate that older adults are engaged in various ways. They can be formally engaged (e.g., volunteering in a community kitchen [a 71-year-old woman from Belgium in **Chapter 4**]), but just as well informally (e.g., helping neighbors through one's knowledge of the neighborhood as a long-term resident [**Vignette 4**, **Chapter 6**]). Their civic engagement can be digital (e.g., remaining up to date on what is happening in one's home country through YouTube [Beatrice in **Chapter 5**]) or in real life (e.g., being involved in a Congolese diaspora organization in Brussels [Christian in **Chapter 5]**). All these examples expose what Serrat (2025) terms the multidimensional nature of civic engagement in later life.

Throughout the chapters, older adults' formal civic engagement was often characterized by volunteering or involvement in neighborhood associations. **Chapters 4** and **5** show how these older adults were involved in their communities through being active volunteers (e.g., a 71-year-old Belgian woman who started volunteering in the kitchen of a neighborhood association [**Chapter 4**]) or engaged in associational life (e.g., Farida's engagement in the activities of a women-only association [**Chapter 5**]). Broader research confirms that older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods come together in community groups to resist adverse challenges in their neighborhoods. For example, evidence from Manchester shows that this community organizing can be sustained financially and supported socially by local stakeholders and authorities (Community Savers, 2022).

Networks arising from these community groups are essential, as they enable small, routinized actions of reciprocal care, such as regular neighborhood gatherings and activities that foster community building (Tenquist et al., 2024). All three empirical chapters deal with this theme in their own way, but the important role of community organizations is especially significant for long-term residents who, as **Chapter 6** suggests, might be particularly excluded from civic engagement opportunities in their neighborhoods through adverse changes, such as a changing population composition or neighborhood decay (**Vignette 1** and **2**). For them, social networks are a valuable resource enabling them to stay connected in their neighborhoods.

Because of different and often adverse neighborhood features, the dynamics of place attachment and civic engagement are different for older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods than in more well-to-do urban neighborhoods (Finlay et al., 2019; Tonkens & Verhoeven, 2019). Older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are for instance more likely to be excluded from, particularly formal, civic engagement opportunities (Serrat et al., 2021). Throughout the chapters, informal dimensions of civic engagement in later life are a recurring topic. **Chapter 4** and **6** touch upon how formal opportunities for civic engagement have slowly declined in the studied neighborhoods,

leaving older residents with fewer alternative formal options to engage. In response, older adults make use of, for example, informal political advocacy (e.g., a 78-yeard-old Spanish man who, with others, occupied buildings [**Chapter 4**]), or informal care (e.g., one participant who administers medication to a male visitor at a neighborhood place [**Vignette 5, Chapter 6**]).

Throughout the chapters, older adults regularly speak about these informal or "smaller" acts of helping others, which is something that Warburton and McLaughlin (2005) refer to as "little kindnesses". While the participants in **Chapter 6** make allusions to how they feel that their informal help to neighbors "cannot truly qualify as volunteering" (part of **Vignette 3**) or is an activity of which "there is no need to let people know" (part of **Vignette 4**) , I argue differently: engaging in these small informal helping activities can create and solidify social interactions and care relations, which is particularly important in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods where social networks can deteriorate quickly (Taei et al., 2023).

Moreover, civic engagement should not be understood solely in terms of the activities that people engage in. Current approaches to civic engagement, particularly those centered on predefined "activity-types" (Torres et al., accepted manuscript), offer too narrow of a view. As such, the data suggests that civic engagement is deeply tied to older adults' identity and sense of meaning. From one 78-year old Spanish man who stated that "solidarity" had "moved" him to civically engage (**Chapter 5**), to Ayoub in **Chapter 5** who insinuated that underneath his civic engagement lies the desire to "learn to understand people", to a participant saying her "heart opens" when he comes to a neighborhood organization (part of **Vignette 5; Chapter 6**), there are numerous examples of participants ascribing meaning and self-identification through civic engagement in later life. This is something that Reyes (2024) suggests as well: engagement often reflects what individuals find meaningful and what they hope to achieve, making it part of an ongoing identity-building process.

Acknowledging the diverse meanings attributed to civic engagement, as well as the different civic activities older adults engage in, paints a more nuanced and accurate picture of how older adults are involved with their surroundings. The data particularly suggests that, even though the studied groups are generally negatively framed where their civic engagement is concerned, such as "stuck in place" and "unable to adapt" in the case of long-term older residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Buffel & Phillipson, 2019), or "vulnerable" and "excluded" for older migrants (Smarika, 2024), they can parallelly be agentic and resistant. This agency is not always manifest or visibly heroic, but it is rather what Katz (2004) would call "disaggregated": it is embedded in small and not so easily observable everyday acts of help and kindness. They are seemingly trivial activities that nevertheless challenge adversity in some ways, without directly opposing or resisting wider power structures.

In sum, the chapters provide evidence for the need to expand our understanding of what counts as civic engagement. Rather than focusing only on formal activities, such as volunteering, we should recognize the value of more informal or less institutionally visible forms, such as informal help, digital civic engagement, or associational membership. By taking these different forms of civic engagement, from small and informal to change-inspired and formal, into account, this research contributes to a broader understanding of civic engagement in later life and hopefully inspires future studies to employ a more nuanced and empowering lens.

1.2. Places and older adults' civic engagement are interwoven through time

A complex interrelationship between aging and place exists, which takes different shapes in diverse contexts (Cutchin & Rowles, 2024). In this dissertation, I used a critical approach through addressing neighborhood adversity and the social inequalities that come with it. Places do not support everyone equally (Cribbin et al., 2021), and studies that concern diverse groups of older adults' civic engagement might benefit from a deeper understanding of the inequalities related to place and of how potentially excluded groups of older adults make us of place to civically engage. In **Chapter 5,** older

migrants talk about how places can inhibit tensions, due to the nature of activities, interpersonal relationships or the societal context, which sometimes leads to being excluded from civic engagement. In **Chapter 4** and **6**, older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods speak about exclusion as well, through for instance decreasing social networks and feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods. However, older adults are a heterogeneous group: some can indeed be disadvantaged and disengaged, while some might benefit from neighborhood features (Smith et al., 2018). In Chapter **4** and **5**, for example, allusions are made to how the proximity of neighborhood organizations facilitates associational membership or involvement, which might benefit those who live nearby, while possibly excluding those who live farther away.

In the light of research that sees older adults as engaged actors who contribute to urban change (e.g., Lager et al., 2013; Salles, 2025), my findings underline that place and civic engagement are intertwined and not isolated concepts. Following **Chapter 7**'s summary of environmental approaches, the empirical chapters of this dissertation not only engage with how person-place relations can be thought of as *interactional* (with a primary focus on how the physical environment shapes older adults' lives), but they can also be seen through a *transactional* lens (giving priority to how place and persons mutually influence each other in both directions), which are two of three main perspectives that have during the years being used to examine the relation between ageing and place, as described by Oswald et al. (2024).

Hence, from an interactional perspective, I would argue that older adults' civic engagement is influenced by a wide array of environmental factors (e.g., neighborhood solidarity or perceived challenges [**Chapter 4**], proximity and a welcoming context [**Chapter 5**] or decreased social networks and neighborhood decay [**Chapter 6**]). I also refer, however, to how older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods talk about changing their neighborhoods through their civic engagement. In **Chapter 4**, participants' stories suggest that neighborhood adversity can serve as a catalyst for civic engagement. They discussed contributing to changes in their neighborhoods, through, for instance, collective formal engagement (e.g., a group of parents protesting the halt to

the construction of secondary school) or more informal, personal engagement (e.g., helping a neighbor with renovations). Consider the example of the 70-year-old woman from Finland, who, with others, created a "neighborhood living room" where people come together. In doing so, she, with others, re-shaped the neighborhood environment for the better.

As such, in terms of a transactional perspective on person-environment relations, **Chapter 5** goes deeper into how the places where older migrants civically engage can be sites of friction and exclusion, but also activity, social interactions and reciprocity. In **Chapter 6**, participants talk about socio-economic adversity, through neighborhood decay, unsafety feelings or a decreased community feeling, but equally about providing forms of informal care and support to neighbors. This shows how older adults can be resilient in the face of neighborhood adversity, pointing to how this resilience takes shape in a dynamic interrelationship with the neighborhood environment (Parsell et al., 2016; Wild et al., 2013).

Moreover, my findings also allude to how person-place relations can also be observed through a *co-constitutional* lens (a third person-environment perspective that highlights the ongoing and ever-changing process of how persons and places interrelate [Oswald et al., 2024]). A significant part of the chapters (i.e., **Chapter 1, 4, 6** and **7**) have referred to a "life course of place" approach (Lekkas et al., 2017; Walsh, 2024) to examine the connection between place and the life course, and to explore how the two concepts interweave. A "life course of place" framework builds further on the dynamic and transactional relationship between place and civic engagement and adds the element of time to the equation.

Bronfenbrenner (2000), in his well-known work on how ecological levels interact, already added attention for the notion of time, which he called the chronosystem, arguing that time structures how individuals experience their environment. **Chapter 6**, that has a "life course of place" as its main theoretical focus, pinpoints that in time, the two disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Brabantwijk and Kuregem), have changed

from environments with a strong community feeling and reciprocal engagement to environments where this spirit of togetherness is lacking, leading to changed and adapted, but not completely diminished and still relevant, informal help between long-term residents and their neighbors.

Older adults' agency is a recurring theme in the different chapters. They demonstrate this agency in the face of adverse neighborhood influences, which is something that, as argued most explicitly in **Chapter 4**, is not often recognized by researchers studying disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Vervaecke and Meisner (2021) argue that when we write about older adults, there is a danger of "compassionate ageism", a discourse that combines "so-called positive or warm perceptions of older people (…) with attributes of incompetence, frailty, dependence, passivity, and victimhood" (p. 161). This perspective denies their agentic capacities. An explicit focus on agency highlights older adults' contributions to their environment and makes us see the intricate ways that they are engaged actors that shape their communities and environments, and not just excluded, "passive" or care-dependent actors, which is corroborated by broader research (e.g., Dury et al., 2023; Gott et al., 2024; Wanka, 2018).

One important finding that is recurrent in all empirical chapters is the significance of "third places", and specifically neighborhood organizations, that provide the circumstances in which civic engagement and social interactions can take place, be sustained and grow (Finlay et al., 2024). In our findings, neighborhood organizations form an essential part of the socio-physical environment (Wahl & Gitlin, 2019) and they seem to foster older adults' civic engagement. I make this statement, while being fully aware of the limitations of this dissertation: third places can take on a variety of forms and they might foster the inclusion of some groups over others (Custers & Engbersen, 2022), which was unfortunately outside of the scope of this research. Regardless of this hiatus, in **Chapter 4**, neighborhood organizations are seen by participants as relevant places in one's proximity that inspire civic engagement, while in **Chapter 5** and **6**, neighborhood organizations are considered as venues nurturing reciprocal deeds (e.g., feeling welcomed or "finding a family" [**Vignette 5, Chapter 6**]) and enabling collective

action (e.g., through transnational support, in the case of Christian who sent supplies to Congo through a diaspora association [**Chapter 5**]).

In relation to the importance of these neighborhood places, **Chapter 5** particularly argues that the neighborhood environment might not be the only relevant point of reference for examining older adults' civic engagement: older migrants talk about their civic engagement in different spatial contexts during their life course, such as family environments, work, neighborhood places and transnational environments. As such, migratory trajectories create place affiliations, support networks and civic engagements both transnationally and locally (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020), leading to a plural understanding of place which serves as the context for older migrants' civic engagement.

Overall, in the different chapters, the key message is that neighborhood environments, different places, as well as "life course of place" trajectories, are interrelated with older adults' civic engagement. Current research posits that people and place are linked in complex ways across the life course (Walsh, 2024), and I argue as well that environments, life-course trajectories and older adults' civic engagement are interwoven concepts, and ongoing research focusing on understanding this entanglement might enable us to better understand the underlying mechanisms of how older adults' civic engagement is not only shaped by, but also shapes their environment, through time.

1.3. Synthesis of research contributions to the literature

Several main contributions are derived from this dissertation that come from engagement with the different knowledge gaps. I summarize them here:

1. In terms of **conceptual breadth**, I argue that, beyond formal practices, older adults engage in a wide range of informal, political and digital civic activities. I also challenge the reductive focus on predefined "activity-types" arguing instead for a more expansive view. Recognizing the multidimensionality of civic engagement

in later life, both in activity-type and in how meanings are attributed to it, allows for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the term.

2. In terms of **neighborhood dynamics,** I suggest that the neighborhood influences civic engagement in diverse ways, but I also emphasize that older adults are agentic and resistant, even in adverse neighborhood contexts. They actively shape their environments through their civic engagement. This focus on agency challenges narratives of decline in later life and centralizes the contributions older adults make to their surroundings.

3. In terms of **diverse populations**, I contend that older adults from diverse and potentially marginalized contexts, with, in this work, a focus on older migrants and older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, see and make use of their environments in various and complex ways, highlighting the importance of context.

4. In terms of **life-course and place trajectories**, I refer to how individual and neighborhood life-course trajectories co-constitute each other, which is pivotal for understanding the temporality and interlinkedness of older adults' civic engagement.

2. Methodological, theoretical and ethical reflections

In this part, I will present some methodological, theoretical and ethical reflections that I found relevant for sharing. The reflections dialogue in various ways with the statements made in the methodological approach (**Chapter 2**), while also building further upon them, through the gained insights of completing and writing up this dissertation.

2.1. Methodological reflections

In terms of the dissertation's knowledge gaps, the methods used were useful for responding to some, while not ideal for engaging with all. Here, it is important to remember that this research was part of a top-down research project in which the qualitative research design was more or less set. The CIVEX-project mainly aimed to investigate the multidimensional civic engagement of diverse groups of older adults from a life-course perspective, through looking at obstacles and enablers. As such, in terms of knowledge gap **1** and **3** (i.e., **conceptual breadth** and **diverse populations**), this research design served these aims quite well. For answering knowledge gaps **2** and **4** (i.e., **neighborhood dynamics** and **life-course and place trajectories**), I had to work, for a big part, with what was said between the lines, as these topics were not covered in the interview guide, which had to be the same across country partners.

Luckily, even though we had a fixed interview scheme, the life-story approach we adopted proved to be very interesting. It provided room for narrativity and for participants to digress from the questions, which resulted in the fact that there was enough inductive data to work with to respond to the knowledge gaps. As Switsers et al. (2021) show, life-story interviews can shift power dynamics by thoroughly listening to a person's expression of his, her or their own complex individual experiences and the context in which these experiences occur. This pattern is mirrored in the present study, where I wanted to know more about older adults' own experiences of and attributed meanings to civic engagement, and the exclusion that might come with it. Life-story interviews provided the methodological space to engage with participants in a more nuanced and deeper way, providing avenues for going more or less "off topic", following participants' narratives, which is more difficult to do during (semi-)structured, topic-based, interviews.

Moreover, the use of a participatory visual method, namely the life diagram, enabled deeper reflection, dialogue, and participant involvement (see **Chapter 3**, where Claire drew a horse, followed by an exploration of memories of life events that this horse

evoked). However, not all participants engaged with the life diagrams during the interviews: some lacked interest, others faced difficulties (e.g., in terms of writing or drawing), and others deemed themself not capable enough to complete the task (e.g., feeling overwhelmed by the question of visualizing their civic engagement through time).

This highlights a broader tension in participatory research, particularly when working with underserved or disadvantaged groups: meaningful engagement requires time, trust, and methodological accessibility. Without adequate support and preparation, participation tends to favor those already equipped with the necessary resources or confidence (Ravi et al., 2025; Seibel et al., 2023). In hindsight, more time could have been devoted to introducing and explaining the methods, particularly because the life-story interviews structured around five dimensions of civic engagement in later life, and were joined by life diagrams, a socio-economic survey and a civic engagement questionnaire. A more thorough preparation phase for participants might have ensured they felt better prepared and more inspired to contribute.

This point of attention is not something that participants explicitly told me after the interviews took place, but it is more an indirect conclusion after observing participants' attitudes before, during and immediately after the interviews. After two or three life diagrams, participants generally lost interest in filling in the life diagrams, and after one hour and a half or two hours of life-story interviewing, participants generally felt tired, needed a break, or wanted to end the interview. This experience underscores the importance of addressing power imbalances and fostering inclusive research environments from the outset (James & Buffel, 2022).

To overcome these issues of fatigue and over-burdening in the future, a good idea would be, in my opinion, to co-create the design and structure of the data collection with participants themselves, to get a better grip of how long each data collection session should take, how many materials should be included, and how long the interviews should be. A smaller participant pool than the one I was required to reach during my fieldwork might be beneficial to achieve this. Other, more participatory, data collection

methods, such as walk-along interviews (D'Hooghe et al., 2023), neighborhood life-story focus groups (Thurber, 2019) and ethnographic approaches (Rishbeth et al., 2018) could have provided more place-based insights. I will come back to these methods in the section concerning limitations and future directions.

2.2. Theoretical reflections

The three empirical chapters, and particularly **Chapters 4** and **5**, are grounded in inductive insights which opened new avenues for understanding the civic engagement of older adults, particularly in relation to place, neighborhood, and life-course trajectories.

Important to note is that the chapters' empirical findings did not develop in isolation. They co-evolved with the theoretical frameworks introduced in **Chapter 7**. The theoretical approaches represented in the integrated conceptual framework (**Figure 7.1**) were environmental, exclusion- or life course-related, and their intersections ("life course of place" for the intersection of life course and environment, "spatial justice" for exclusion and environment, and "intersectional life course" and "cumulative disadvantage" for exclusion and life course). In this dissertation, I was able to expand on some of these approaches, but not all. I was mainly able to focus on how neighborhoods and civic engagement are transactionally co-constitutionally entangled (i.e., an environmental perspective), while shaping each other during the life course (i.e., a "life course of place" approach).

These theoretical perspectives provided a lens to interpret the empirical material, but the empirical material equally influenced my interpretation of these theories. As such, this research process was dynamic and iterative, allowing theory and data to inform and inspire each other throughout the study. Through focusing on a "life course of place" approach and environmental approaches, I hope to have been able to make a modest contribution to these theorizations from the perspective of older adults in urban contexts and their civic engagement.

2.3. Ethical reflections

During the interviews, I put some provisions in place to facilitate the conversations and to make participants feel at ease, especially in the light of the rather intense and demanding data collection process described in **section 2.1** (**methodological reflections**). Participants were able to take a break if they wanted to (which happened once or twice), they were able to choose the order of the life diagrams (for example, if their life trajectory was characterized by political engagement, we dealt with this diagram first), and participants were able to choose whether data collection took place at their homes or a public venue (the majority preferred neighborhood organizations). In terms of data processing, the life-story interviews fostered dialogue and discussion, both during and after the interviews. Although no member-check interviews were conducted (Doyle, 2007), I made sure to come back to participants to make sure that any misunderstanding regarding what they told me about their civic engagement was clarified. Furthermore, one feedback presentation was organized in each of the two neighborhoods where the bulk of the data collection took place (i.e., Brabantwijk and Kuregem in Brussels).

In the methodological approach (**Chapter 2**), I already touched upon how recruitment for data collection mainly took place through neighborhood organizations. Especially at the start of the data collection, I was reliant upon gatekeepers to introduce me to potential participants. Gatekeepers were introduced in the goals of the wider CIVEX-project, and I explained to them that I wanted to embed myself as much as I could in the neighborhoods during my fieldwork, thereby making use of their wider network to reach those older adults who did not frequent formal neighborhood places. The reason for recruiting through gatekeepers stemmed from the realization that the groups of older people that I wanted to involve (e.g., older migrants, older residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, but in the scope of the wider CIVEX-project older home care receivers and older residents of residential aged care facilities as well) were, for me, not easy to include.

In the literature, groups that are difficult to recruit are often called “hard to reach” or “hidden” populations (Raifman et al., 2022; Shaghaghi et al., 2011). I found myself reflecting on this term during my doctoral trajectory. Even during data collection, I caught myself considering how to reach those “harder to reach” older adults who did not come to the organizations with whom I was affiliated, and who might be further excluded from formal civic engagement opportunities. Logie (2021), however, criticizes this use of the term “hard to reach”, and argues that exclusion is produced by contextual dimensions created and perpetuated by research designs. In short, I was reminded that as a researcher and data collector, I held the power to “dictate the space(s)” of my own research, and that I implicitly assumed “that the other person will move (towards me) and in effect change their position” (Logie, 2021, p.13). During later stages of my fieldwork, I tried to overcome this issue through making use of different neighborhood places, such as social restaurants, cafés and public spaces to recruit participants.
In consequence, it seems to me that a better term for these populations is systemically excluded populations instead of “hard to reach”. This term emphasizes the responsibility I had, and also the difficulty of, connecting with and embedding myself in my research population’s daily life world. Broader research also makes a point of taking the time to achieve this (Batlle & Carr, 2021).

Although I am proud of the research that I have done, I remain reflective and critical: older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods or older migrants can be “hard to reach” populations for researchers who generally lack networks within these groups and do not know where to start searching. This was my reality at the start of the doctoral trajectory. As such, I believe that fieldworkers should be given the time to get to know their research population and also think of strategies for inclusive data collection, such as making use of a plurality of neighborhood places and getting to know the gatekeepers in the neighborhood who are in contact with these systematically excluded populations.

In sum, researchers often lack the support, time and resources enabling them to thoroughly listen to and engage with their research population, which often leads to either systemic exclusion of marginalized groups or research extraction, contributing to

theory but not to practice (Bothello & Bonfim, 2025). Although I have put in place safeguards to mitigate extractivism as much as I could during fieldwork, I remain reflective about what I or future research could do better to do this more effectively. For me, ensuring that both participant and researcher benefit from the research process implies changing power dynamics. In the next section, I will suggest some strategies based on my own fieldwork and research experience.

3. Limitations and directions for future research

In this section, I will go deeper into the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research directions. They revolve around 1) an emic perspective to civic engagement in later life, 2) the entanglement of civic engagement trajectories, 3) a diverse approach to older adults' civic engagement, 4) a macro perspective on older adults' civic engagement and 5) what remains overlooked in the integrated conceptual framework.

3.1. An emic perspective to civic engagement in later life

Throughout the chapters, I reflected on how adults, in their own words, define civic engagement. This is fitting in the case of older adults who remain under-theorized when it comes to their civic engagement, such as older migrants (Torres & Serrat, 2019) and older resident of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Dikmans et al., 2025). Expanding our understanding of emic (i.e., the way one's research population understands a concept of study [Mostowlansky & Rota, 2020]) definitions related to the civic engagement for older adults in these contexts can make our definitions of civic engagement in later life more inclusive.

A key challenge for future research lies therefore in going beyond top-down approaches that risk reproducing extractive dynamics and overlooking participants' lived realities. This was, as stated before, also a limitation to this study. Combining participatory and ethnographic methods might offer a promising way forward. Participatory place-based methods, such as walk-along interviews (D'Hooghe et al., 2023), photo-elicitation

(Häussermann et al., under review), or neighborhood life-story focus groups (Thurber, 2019), not only deepen our understanding of place-related experiences but also involve older adults more directly in the production of knowledge. Ethnographic approaches, including long-term presence in neighborhoods or participant observation, can also foster trust and uncover the often subtle, embedded forms of how people live their lives (Rishbeth et al., 2018). Rather than choosing one over the other, future studies could explore how these two approaches might work in tandem, generating richer, more situated insights while also nuancing the researcher–participant nexus.

Future direction:

> We should put in place research designs that focus on inductive and emic understandings of civic engagement in later life, grounded in older adults' realities. This can be done through including participatory research methods, such as walk-along or photo-elicitation interviews, or ethnographic methods.

3.2. The entanglement of civic engagement trajectories

The multidimensional definition of older adults' civic engagement used in this dissertation elucidates how civic engagement is a broad concept that comprises many activities. The interview guide maintained a rigid division between the different dimensions of civic engagement in later life, inquiring about these dimensions separately. Nevertheless, civic engagement activities can also interact and interfere with one another (Vercauteren et al., 2024). For example, engaging in informal care activities towards close friends and family members might leave little time and resources for formal engagement, which is called "role overload" (Strauss, 2021). In another example, research suggests that, by engaging in political activities online, older adults may build connections with peers and become motivated to take part in civic initiatives offline as well (Reuter & Scharf, 2025).

Unfortunately, how civic engagement activities interact or are mutually in- or exclusive throughout the life course was out of the scope of this research. Future studies could explore this further to advance our understanding of how civic activities intertwine. This is especially relevant in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods where, generally, a prevalence of informal help versus weak involvement in formal civic engagement has been observed (e.g., Dean, 2022; Martinez et al., 2011).

Future direction:

> Future conceptual discussions on civic engagement in later life should pay attention to dynamic, intertwining and evolving civic activities that may be mutually in- or exclusive throughout the life course.

3.3. A diverse approach to older adults' civic engagement

This dissertation's focus on the experiences of civic engagement of specific groups of older adults, such as those living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and older migrants, while timely and important, overlooks other groups, such as older adults in rural areas (e.g., Winterton et al., 2025), older adults living in residential aged care facilities (e.g., Villar & Peiró-Milián, 2025) or older adults with disabilities (e.g., Majón-Valpuesta & Levasseur, 2025).

Also, I mainly reached what is often referred to as "third age" older adults (e.g., older adults who are relatively healthy, often in their 60s or 70s, and who engage in a wide range of activities [Van Kampen et al., 2023]), and not so much those older adults that are considered "the oldest old", who are more at risk of social exclusion in a variety of domains (Key & Culliney, 2018). Furthermore, even though life courses and civic engagement trajectories are gendered (Dahlberg et al., 2020; Hagestad & Dykstra, 2016), it is important to acknowledge that, unfortunately, I scarcely considered gender differences in relation to civic engagement. All these different social categories also intersect through time (Ferrer et al., 2017).

Future direction:

Future research could benefit from a diverse approach to civic engagement in later life, in terms of gender, social or age categories, through exploring the intersection of these different categories, and how they influence older adults' civic engagement differently.

3.4. A macro perspective on civic engagement in later life

As I zoomed in on older migrants and older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, I might have overlooked how civic engagement trajectories are structurally influenced by macro or societal forces. Within community gerontology, for instance, Greenfield et al. (2019) point to how meso (neighborhood) and macro (societal) levels interact, showing how societal changes can shape neighborhood dynamics and vice versa. Research on civic engagement in later life might benefit from such a macro perspective that scrutinizes the interrelation with the neighborhood environment.

Allusions to this macro perspective were made during the interviews by participants, even though these themes were not part of the interview questions. For instance, the influence of the recent COVID-19 pandemic was a recurrent topic. Moreover, citizenship issues and one's formal relationship with the state were often mentioned by older migrants. This is something that is also briefly touched upon in **Chapter 5** (e.g., Christian saying that upon arrival in Belgium, it was only possible for him to stay in Belgium for study purposes, which curbed his civic engagement).

Other allusions were collectively lived events that had an impact on persons' lives and also their civic engagement (e.g., the Belgian 'Marc Dutroux' case in the 1990s or the wide scale anti-nuclear weapons protests in the 1980s).

Future direction:

We should examine how the civic engagement of older adults in their neighborhoods co-evolves with broader, macro-societal processes.

3.5. What remains overlooked in the integrated conceptual framework

Here, I return to the integrated conceptual framework of **Chapter 7** (**Figure 7.1**). I have mainly focused on civic engagement in later life in relation to a "life course of place" perspective and transactional or co-constitutional environmental approaches, which are both found at the intersection of environmental and life-course theory. I have examined how environments are bi-directionally related to older adults' civic engagement and how places have life course of their own, but I believe research could benefit from a more zoomed-in approach to these dynamics, and to more deeply explore the nuances of how civic engagement and the neighborhood environment interact through time in the context of individuals' lives. Therefore, a more intricate exploration of the mechanisms underlying "how people link to place over time" (Walsh, 2024, p.66) is needed, both in research design and analysis, which could be achieved by life course, narrative-based or longitudinal research.

Moreover, the exclusion-based approaches outlined in **Chapter 7** have not received due attention in the empirical chapters. Applying an exclusion-based lens to environmental approaches, life-course theory and the literature of older adults' civic engagement in urban environments would bring theory forward. Exclusion-based theory has its roots in Lefebvre's (1968) work. Connecting his work to life-course and environmental theory encourages exploration of how exclusion from civic engagement manifests itself spatially (e.g., through "spatial justice" [Buffel et al., 2025; Soja, 2010]), how it accumulates throughout the life course (e.g., cumulative disadvantage [Crystal and Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003]), or how it affects groups of older adults differently (e.g., intersectional life-course theory [Ferrer et al., 2017]).

Future direction:

The integrated conceptual framework could be used as a theoretical blueprint for further exploration of older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Future research could expand on the theoretical ideas that this dissertation engages with (e.g., environmental or "life course of place" approaches) or focus on exclusion-based approaches intersecting with life-course and environmental theory.

4. Policy and practice recommendations

This section translates this discussion's findings into insights for an interested public outside of academia, including policymakers, urban planners or community organizations. Four key messages revolve around 1) supporting diverse forms of civic engagement, 2) investing in neighborhood infrastructure, 3) acknowledging place plurality, and 4) planning with a life- course perspective in mind. These policy recommendations resonate with the policy recommendations that we made resulting from the CIVEX-project. That is why **the English version of the CIVEX-policy brief**, as well as **the Dutch-language brochure**, written for a Belgian audience, are attached in this dissertation (**appendices 8.1 and 8.2**). I refer to the last couple of pages for these two documents. Throughout the four messages, I also address some already existing policy initiatives and debates in Belgium or Flanders.

4.1. Support diverse forms of civic engagement

Policymakers and practitioners would benefit from recognizing and valuing alternate forms of civic engagement in later life, such as informal, digital or political activities, as being equal to formal volunteering. It is therefore crucial for policy and practice to see and support older adults in a multiplicity of civic roles: as engaged members of society (e.g., Joy, 2020), as political activists (e.g., Serrat et al., 2023; Wanka, 2018) or as digital actors (e.g., Reuters & Scharf, 2025; Seifert & Rössel, 2021). This might entail providing

the resources necessary to develop these different roles, through neighborhoods investing in and providing digital platforms of exchange and support, or listening to and including older adults' voices and concerns as to how they think about their neighborhood and how they see its future. In Flanders, one key pillar concerning future policy directions regarding older adults is the "creation of stimulating policies that enables participation for every older adult" (Vlaams Ouderenbeleidsplan 2020-2025; citation translated from Dutch). It is essential to look at this "participation" as comprising a multitude of activities that all need a tailored approach.

In terms of informal help, scholars argue that a refusal to integrate informal help, care or support in what counts as civic engagement is not gender-astute (Stacey et al., 2016), but equally not disadvantaged-urban-neighborhood- (Dikmans et al., 2025; Tonkens & Verhoeven, 2019) or older migrants-astute (Klaver, 2025). For inclusive policy responses to foster civic engagement in later life in different context, it is thus important for (local) governments to help neighborhood relations and informal help to grow and flourish. Lewis et al. (2023), in the United Kingdom, call for "community-based strategies" for making the social infrastructure of neighborhoods more resilient. This means investing in social connections and places where people can come together, understanding how social dynamics might have changed through time, recognizing how care relations play out locally, and finding locally embedded solutions to strengthen them.

4.2. Invest in neighborhood infrastructure

Creating inclusive spaces and institutions that foster mutual support and civic engagement are key to strengthening older adults' civic engagement in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, it is crucial to recognize what is already in place and build further on this, with an emphasis on listening to older residents and putting an infrastructure in place that also harnesses their civic engagement (Tiernan et al., 2013). In order to do so, we need both policies direct at the individual- (e.g., in what kind of civic activities do older residents already engage in and how can we support

this?) and the neighborhood-level (e.g., what kind of environmental resources are needed to maintain and build further upon this neighborhood engagement?).

Throughout this dissertation, I have emphasized the important roles that neighborhood organizations play as "third places" (Finlay et al., 2024) where civic engagement takes place. Currently, we are generally witnessing a disappearance of community spaces at a local level preventing spontaneous activities of community-building (Steijn, 2024). Policy initiatives that strengthen these third places can therefore help to inspire and sustain older adults' civic engagement in their neighborhoods. Important preconditions for these third places to be inclusive and sustainable in neighborhoods are, based on the findings of the different chapters, openness and sensitivity to the needs of volunteers, a context that is receptive to older adults' diverse needs, but also the fact that the ideas of visitors are heard and taken seriously, so that reciprocal relations, albeit through small activities, can take form and flourish.

Attention should be given to the mechanisms and contexts of place in relation to civic engagement. Issues of proximity and meaningful activity-based places are in this sense important. Other dimensions that have been somewhat overlooked in this work are the presence of religious and faith-based places (Weil et al., 2025) and the availability of green spaces and parks (Häussermann et al., under review). This last feature is especially salient in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, where green spaces are often scarce, while appealing green spaces can encourage engagement and social interactions (Chenyang et al., 2022). In Flanders, the issue of loneliness has been a priority after the COVID-19 pandemic (Vlaams Eenzaamheidsplan 2021-2024), which connects to civic engagement and community building. Local policy in initiatives could contribute to creating inclusive environments, through implementing co-production strategies with older residents to ensure shared ownership of place (Ellery & Ellery, 2019).

4.3. Acknowledge place plurality

Policy and practice should consider place plurality through transnational and emotional geographies when designing interventions for older adults in urban contexts. Transnational geographies have to do with transnationalism and how people, particularly those who have migrated to another country, connect with their social networks across borders (Yea, 2021), while emotional geographies relate to the dynamics of being emotionally involved with places and persons (Davidson et al., 2006). It is essential to see these concepts as interwoven. For example, older migrants' sense of belonging derives from a complex interaction between various places, both stemming from the neighborhoods in which they live and the country where they were born (Liu et al., 2020).

In terms of civic engagement, this means that simultaneous engagement can happen that blurs the border between places (McCann et al., 2021). This leads to interesting ramifications for policy and practice. For instance, an older adult can engage in digital civic engagement through his, her or their smartphone, while being present at a neighborhood organization close to their home. Policy and practice initiatives that are aware of the plurality of place, which blurs the distinction between what is physical and virtual, or transnational and local, could foster a forward-looking way of thinking about civic engagement in relation to place, strengthening the inclusion of diverse groups of older adults in civic engagement initiatives. In this dissertation, I have argued that older adults have a crucial role to play in the social and cultural life of local communities. However, we risk overlooking the civic contribution of many different groups of older adults. As volunteers make social life thrive and society more cohesive (Williams et al., 2025), we need to start seeing the contributions of those older adults who are already actively engaged, albeit in different places or activities than we might be used to recognizing, and including their perspectives. In other words, when designing civic engagement initiatives, the transnational and the local could be connected, for instance through incorporating digital activities, such as staying informed about one's home

country through YouTube, in the activity offer of local neighborhood organizations and volunteering sites.

4.4. Plan with a life-course perspective in mind

Understanding that both people and neighborhoods evolve is essential for creating civic engagement opportunities in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Policies should support engagement with a life-course perspective in mind. Inspired by a "life course of place" perspective (Walsh, 2024), initiatives in policy and practice could think about how to accommodate and intervene when neighborhoods change. Understanding under which conditions and in which ways neighborhood residents adapt effectively to adverse change is the first step in strengthening community resilience (Bacon et al., 2010) and in creating a network for collective civic engagement to flourish and counter future adversity.

Moreover, it remains important to look at individual life courses and reflect on how, in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, life events and inequalities accumulate, which might lead to the consolidation of exclusion of older adults' civic engagement during the life course. This is the main premise behind "cumulative disadvantage" (Crystal and Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003). Policies should therefore offer financial and social resources to tackle social inequalities regarding civic engagement opportunities through time and develop inclusive strategies that reflect the evolving and differing needs of older adults in potentially disadvantaged situations, such as those living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods or older migrants.

5. Conclusion

In the general introduction, I outlined four knowledge gaps concerning the civic engagement of older adults in an urban context, including older migrants and older adults living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. They revolved around 1) conceptualizing civic engagement more broadly, 2) understanding dynamic

neighborhood influences, 3) recognizing the diverse experiences of older adults, and 4) examining how neighborhood changes interrelate with engagement. In the general discussion, I have argued that is pivotal to rethink civic engagement in urban areas as embedded in place, diversity, and time. I suggest that, to support inclusive forms of civic engagement in later life, we should expand our definitions of what civic engagement entails, as well as our understanding of the mechanisms, temporality, spatial dynamics, and directionality underpinning this civic engagement. A cross-pollination between research, policy and practice is also needed to advance our understanding of civic engagement in later life, both in and outside academia.

References

Bacon, N., Brophy, M., Mguni, N., Mulgan, G., & Shandro, A. (2010). The state of happiness: Can public policy shape people's wellbeing and resilience?. *Young Foundation*. https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/The-State-of-Happiness.pdf

Baldassar, L., & Wilding, R. Migration, aging, and digital kinning: The role of distant care support networks in experiences of aging well. *The Gerontologist, 60* (2), 313–321. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz156

Batlle, I.C., & Carr, S. (2021). Trust and Relationships in Qualitative Research: A critical reflection on how we can value time. In B.C. Clift, J. Gore, S. Gustafsson, S. Bekker, I.C. Batlle, J. Hatchard (eds.), *Temporality in Qualitative Inquiry: Theories, Methods and Practices* (pp. 158-171). Routledge.

Bothello, J. & Bonfim, L. (2025). Marginalized communities and the problem of research extraction. *Journal of Management Studies, 62*(1): 526-532. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13027

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2000). Ecological systems theory. In A. E. Kazdin (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (pp. 129–133). Oxford University Press.

Buffel, T., & Philipson, C. (2019). Ageing in a gentrifying neighbourhood: Experiences of community change in later life. *Sociology*, *53*(6), 987–1004. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519836848

Buffel, T., Yarker, S., & Doran, P. (2025). A spatial justice approach to urban ageing research. In T. Buffel, S. Yarker, & P. Doran (eds.), *Reimagining Age-Friendly Communities: Urban Ageing and Spatial Justice* (pp. 3-24). Policy Press.

Burr, J.A, Han, S., Lee, H.J., Tavares, J.L., Mutchler, J.E. (2018). Health benefits associated with three helping behaviors: Evidence for incident cardiovascular disease. *Journals of Gerontology Series B, Psychologigal Sciences and Social Sciences, 73*(3):492-500. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbx082

Chenyang, D., Maruthaveeran, S., Shahidan, M.F. (2022). The usage, constraints and preferences of green space at disadvantage neighborhood: A review of empirical evidence. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 75, 127696. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2022.127696.

Community Savers. (2022). *Community Savers 2022: Outcomes, learning, and next steps*.

Cribbin, T., Finnegan, A., Hammond, M., King, S., & Phillipson, C. (2021). *Ageing well in place in Hulme, Manchester*. March, 2021.

Crystal, S. & Shea, D. (1990). Cumulative advantage, cumulative disadvantage, and inequality among elderly people. *The Gerontologist*, *30*(4): 437–43. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/30.4.437

Custers, G., & Engbersen, G. (2022). Linking social capital and organizational ties: How different types of neighborhood organizations broker resources for the urban poor. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *46*(10), 1992–2008. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2137032

Cutchin, M.P., & Rowles, G.D. (2024). Introduction to the 'Handbook on Aging and Place'. In M. P. Cutchin & G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 37-60). Edward Elgar Publishing.

D'Hooghe, S., Inaç, Y., Deforche, B., Van Dyck, D., de Ridder, K., Vandevijvere, S., Van de Weghe, N., & Dury, S. (2023). The role of the perceived environment for recreational walking among adults in socioeconomically disadvantaged situations: A study using walk-along interviews. *SSM - Population Health, 23*, 101456. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2023.101456

Dahlberg, L., McKee, K.J., Fritzell, J., Heap, J., Lennartsson, C. (2020). Trends and gender associations in social exclusion in older adults in Sweden over two decades. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics, 89*: 104032. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2020.104032

Dannefer, D. (2003). Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the life course: Cross-fertilizing age and social science theory. T*he Journals of Gerontology. Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *58*(6): S327–37. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/58.6.S327

Davidson, J., & Bondi, L. (2006). *Emotional Geographies*. Routledge.

Dean, J. (2022). Informal volunteering, inequality, and illegitimacy. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 51(3), 527-544. https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211034580

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Older people living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic engagement in later life* (pp. 192–208). Bristol University Press.

Dikmans, B., Serrat, R., Stegen, H., Vercauteren, T., De Donder, L., & Dury, S. (2025). "Life course of place": Older adults' social networks and informal help amidst urban change. *Urban Planning*, 10: 9909. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i428

Doyle, S. (2007). Member checking with older women: A framework for negotiating meaning. *Health Care for Women International*, 28(10), 888–908. https://doi.org/10.1080/07399330701615325

Dury, S., Brosens, D., Honghui, P., Principi, A., Smetcoren, A.-S., Perek-Białas, J., De Donder, L. (2023). Helping behavior of older adults during the early COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium. *Research on Aging, 45*(1): 8-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/01640275221105231

Ellery, P.J., & Ellery, J. (2019). Strengthening community sense of place through placemaking. *Urban Planning, 4*(2): 237-248. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v4i2.2004

Ferrer, I., Grenier, A., Brotman, S., & Koehn, S. (2017). Understanding the experiences of racialized older people through an intersectional life course perspective. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 41, 10–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2017.02.001

Finlay, J., Esposito, M., Kim, M.H., Gomez-Lopez, I., & Clarke, P. (2019). Closure of 'third places'? Exploring potential consequences for collective health and wellbeing. *Health & Place*, 60, 102225. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102225

Finlay, J., Cannon, M., Meltzer, G.., & Yeh, J. (2024). Aging in third places. In M.P. Cutchin, & G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and place* (pp. 221-240). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Gott, M., Wiles, J., Morgan, T., Williams, L., Morgan, K., Black, S., Koh, A., Fanueli, E., Xu, J., Goodwin, H., Pilimatalawwe, D., & Moeke-Maxwell, T. (2024). Older people's contributions during the Covid-19 pandemic response. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 36*(6), 1396–1416. https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2384322

Greenfield, E.A., Black, K., Buffel, T., & Yeh, J. (2019) 'Community gerontology: A framework for research, policy, and practice on communities and aging'. *The Gerontologist*, 59(5), 803–810. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny089

Hagestad, G.O, & P. Dykstra. (2016). Structuration of the life course: Some neglected aspects. In M.J. Shanahan, J.T. Mortimer, M.K. Johnson (eds.), *Handbook of the Life course*. Springer Publishing Company (pp. 131-157).

Häussermann, F., Gryp, D., Schepers, W., Dikmans, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (under review). How the neighbourhood-built environment shapes loneliness: A photo-elicitation study. (under review in *Health and Place*).

James, H., T. & Buffel. 2022. Co-research with older people: A systematic literature review. *Ageing & Society, 43*(12), 2930-2956. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21002014

Joy, M. (2020). *The right to an age-friendly city: Redistribution, recognition, and senior citizen rights in urban spaces*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Katz, C. (2004). *Growing up global: Economic restructuring and children's everyday lives*. University of Minnesota Press.

Key, W., & Culliney, M. (2018). The oldest old and the risk of social exclusion. *Social Policy and Society*, *17*(1), 47–63. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000518

Klaver, K., Miri, A., & Van Praag, L. (2025). "I don't feel like I have a big role here in Belgium": The societal participation of migrantised women in Antwerp (Belgium). *Societal Impacts, 5,* 100108. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socimp.2025.100108

Lager, D., Van Hoven, B., Huigen, P.P.P. (2013). Dealing with change in old age: Negotiating working-class belonging in a neighbourhood in the process of urban renewal in the Netherlands. *Geoforum, 50*, 54-61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.07.012.

Lefebvre, H. (1968). Le droit à la ville. *Sociologie du Travail*, *10*(4): 456–457.

Lekkas, P., Paquet, C., Howard, N.J. & Daniel, M. (2017). Illuminating the lifecourse of place in the longitudinal study of neighbourhoods and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, *177*, 239-47. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.09.025

Lewis, C., Phillipson, C., Yarker, S., & Lang, L. (2023). *COVID-19, Inequality and Older People: Everyday Life during the Pandemic*. Policy Press.

Liu, S., Liu, Y., & Wang, S. (2020). Constructing a sense of home: Older Chinese migrants ageing in a foreign land. Journal of Sociology, 57(3), 485-500. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783320927083

Logie, C. (2021). *Working with excluded populations in HIV: Hard to reach or out of sight?*. Springer Nature.

Majón-Valpuesta, D., & Levasseur, M. (2025). Older people with disabilities. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic engagement in later life* (pp. 143-160). Bristol University Press.

Martinson, M., & Minkler, M. (2006). Civic engagement and older adults: A critical perspective. *The Gerontologist*, *46*(3): 318–324. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/46.3.318

Martinez, I.L., Crooks, D., Kim, K.S., & Tanner, E. (2011). Invisible civic engagement among older adults: Valuing the contributions of informal volunteering. *The Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 26(1), 23-37. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-011-9137-y

McBride, A.M., M.S. Sherraden, & S. Pritzker. (2006). Civic engagement among low-income and low-wealth families: In their words. *Family Relations, 55*(2):152-162. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005326

McCann, J. A., Leal, D. L., Navarre, R., & Cornelius, W. A. (2021). Transnational political engagement and the civic incorporation of Mexican immigrants in the United States. *Revista Latinoamericana De Opinión Pública*, *10*(1), 129–164. https://doi.org/10.14201/rlop.25779

Mostowlansky, T., & Rota, A. (2020). Emic and etic. In F. Stein (ed.), *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Online: http://doi.org/10.29164/20emicetic

Oswald, F., Wahl, H.-W., Wanka, A., & Chaudhury, H. (2024). Theorizing place and aging: Enduring and novel issues in environmental gerontology. In M. P. Cutchin

& G. D. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 37-60). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Parsell, C., Eggins, E., & Marston, G. (2017). Human agency and social work research: A systematic search and synthesis of social work literature. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *47*(1), 238–255. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv145

Pearce, J., Cherrie, M., Shortt, N., Deary, I. & Thompson C.W. (2018). Life course of place: A longitudinal study of mental health and place. *Royal Geographical Society, 43*(4), 555-572. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12246

Raifman, S., DeVost, M.A., Digitale, J.C., Chen, J.-H., & Morris, M.D. (2022). Respondent-driven sampling: A sampling method for hard-to-reach populations and beyond. *Current Epidemiology Reports, 9*, 38–47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40471-022-00287-8

Ravi, M., Tyagi, S., Gopikumar, V., de Wit , E.E., Bunders, J., Padgett, D., Regeer, B. (2025). Participatory research in low resource settings: Endeavours in epistemic justice at the Banyan, India. Journal of Responsible Technology, 23, 100123. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrt.2025.100123

Reuter, A., & Scharf, T. (2025). Digital civic engagement in later life. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic engagement in later life* (pp. 122-140). Bristol University Press.

Reyes, L. (2024). In their words: African American and Latine immigrant older adults (re)define civic participation. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, *79*(10), gbae143. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbae143

Rishbeth, C., Ganji F., & Vodicka, G. (2018). Ethnographic understandings of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods to inform urban design practice. *Local Environment, 23*(1), 36-53. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1385000

Salles, J. (2024). *Ageing- in- place in a gentrifying neighbourhood: Co- producing knowledge with older adults through community- based filmmaking* (PhD dissertation).

Seibel, B.L., Serafim, R.S., da Silva, N.S., Araújo, J.A.C., Springer, P.R., & Hollist, C.S. (2023). Implementation of Participatory Research in Vulnerable Context:

Methodological Strategies and Challenges. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto), 33*. https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4327e3333

Seifert, A., & Rössel, J. (2021). Digital participation. In D. Gu & M.E. Dupre (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Gerontology and Population Aging* (pp. 1446-1450). Springer International.

Serrat, R., Scharf, T., & Villar, F. (2021). Reconceptualising exclusion from civic engagement in later life: Towards a new research agenda. In K. Walsh, T. Scharf, S. Van Regenmortel, A. Wanka (eds.), *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives* (pp. 245-257). Springer, International Perspectives on Aging.

Serrat, R., Scharf, T. & Villar, F. (2022). Mapping Civic Engagement in Later Life: A Scoping Review of Gerontological Definitions and Typology Proposal. *Voluntas, 33*, 615–626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00346-6

Serrat, R., Chacur-Kiss, K., Villar, F., & Peiró-Milian, I. (2023). For the sake of myself, my colleagues and my community: Exploring the benefits of political participation in later life. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 66*(7), 908-923. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2023.2191129

Serrat, R. (2025). *Civic engagement in later life*. Bristol University Press.

Shaghaghi, A., Bhopal, R. S., & Sheikh, A. (2011). Approaches to recruiting 'hard-to-reach' populations into re-search: A review of the literature. *Health promotion perspectives*, *1*(2), 86–94. https://doi.org/10.5681/hpp.2011.009

Smarika, K.C. (2025). The untold stories of resilience, reworking and resistance of ageing non-European migrant women. *European Journal of Social Work*, *28*(2), 354-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2024.2368255

Smith, R. J., Lehning, A. J., & Kim, K. (2018). Aging in place in gentrifying neighborhoods: Implications for physical and mental health. *The Gerontologist*, *58*(1) 26–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx105

Soja, E.W. (2010). *Seeking spatial justice*. University of Minnesota Press.

Stacey A.F, Gill, T.K, Price, K., Warmington, R., & Taylor, A.W. (2016) Unpaid informal caregivers in South Australia: Population characteristics, prevalence and age-

period-cohort effects 1994–2014. *PLoS ONE, 11*(9): e0161994. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0161994

Steijn, M.PA. (2024). Is social infrastructure punching below its weight in the debate on social mobility?. In A.-T. Renner, L. Plank, & M. Getzner (eds.), *Handbook of Social Infrastructure* (pp. 144-158). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Strauss, S. (2021). Multiple engagement: The relationship between informal care-giving and formal volunteering among Europe's 50+ population. *Ageing and Society*, *41*(7), 1562–1586. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X19001764

Switsers, L., Stegen, H., Van Regenmortel, S., & De Donder, L. (2021). Onderzoek naar de levensloop van ouderen: Ervaringen met het McAdams-levensverhaalinterview. *Kwalon, 26* (1), 53-63. https://doi.org/10.5117/KWA2021.1.006.SWIT

Taei, A., Jönson, H., & Granbom, M. (2023). Crime, disorder, and territorial stigmatization: Older adults living in deprived neighborhoods. *The Gerontologist*, *63*(5), 910–919. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac159

Tangchonlatip, K., Chamratrithirong, A., & Lucktong, A. (2019). The potential for civic engagement of older persons in the ageing society of Thailand. *Journal of Health Research*, *33*(5), 386-397. https://doi.org/10.1108/JHR-08-2018-0083

Tenquist, M., Hartland, T., & Salles, J. (2024). Ageing in the margins: Exploring experiences of precarity in urban environments. In T. Buffel, P. Doran, & S. Yarker (eds.), *Reimagining Age-Friendly Communities: Urban Ageing and Spatial Justice* (pp. 177–203). Bristol University Press.

Thurber A. (2019). The neighborhood story project: Co-creating learning, caring, and empowering environments. *Journal of Community psychology*, *47*(7), 1682–1699. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22221

Tiernan, C., Lysack, C., Neufeld, S., & Lichtenberg, P. A. (2013). Community engagement: An essential component of well-being in older African-American adults. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, *77*(3), 233–257. https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.77.3.d

Tonkens, E., & Verhoeven, I. (2019). The civic support paradox: Fighting unequal participation in deprived neighbourhoods. *Urban Studies*, 56(8), 1595-1610. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018761536

Torres, S., R. Serrat. 2019. Older migrants' civic participation: A topic in need of attention. *Journal of Aging Studies, 50*, 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2019.100790

Torres, S., Ågård, P., Serrat, R., Chacur Kiss, K., Dikmans, B., Häkkinen, E., Vercauteren, T., & Nyqvist, F. (accepted manuscript). Older migrants on civic engagement. (accepted for publication in the *Journal of Civil Society*).

Van Kampen, E., Van den Berg, F., Brouwer, J., & Keijzer, M. (2023). Never too old to learn: Third age adults experience little (self-)ageism or barriers to learning. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 7*(1), 100384. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2022.100384

Vercauteren, T., Van Regenmortel, S., Näsman, M., Nyqvist, F., Brosens, D., Serrat, R., & Dury, S. (2024). Multi-dimensional civic engagement of older Europeans: A latent class analysis. *Ageing and Society*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2400062X

Vervaecke, D., & Meisner, B.A. (2021). Caremongering and assumptions of need: The spread of compassionate ageism during COVID-19. *The Gerontologist*, *61*(2), 159–165. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa131

Villar, F., & Peiró-Milián, I. (2025). Older people living in residential aged-care facilities. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 161-177). Bristol University Press.

Vlaams Eenzaamheidsplan 2021-2024. https://www.departementzorg.be/nl/eenzaamheid-als- beleidsprioriteit

Vlaams Ouderenbeleidsplan 2020-2025. https://www.departementzorg.be/nl/ouderenbeleid

Wahl, H.-W., & Gitlin, L.N. (2019). Linking the socio-physical environment to successful aging. In R. Fernández-Ballesteros, A. Benetos & J.-M. Robine (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Successful Aging* (pp. 570-593). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316677018

Walsh, K. (2024). Life course perspectives on place. In M.P. Cutchin & G.D. Rowles (eds.), *Handbook on Aging and Place* (pp. 6&-81). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Wanka, A. (2018) 'Disengagement as withdrawal from public space: Rethinking the relation between place attachment, place appropriation, and identity- building among older adults', *The Gerontologist*, 58(1): 130–9.

Warburton, J., McLaughlin, D. (2005). 'Lots of little kindnesses': Valuing the role of older Australians as informal volunteers in the community. *Ageing and Society*, *25*(5): 715-730. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X05003648

Wild, K., Wiles, J., & Allen, R. (2013). Resilience: Thoughts on the value of the concept for critical gerontology. *Ageing & Society*, 33(1), 137–158. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X11001073

Williams, T., Lakhani, A., & Spelten, E. (2025). 'Keeps me young at heart': Exploring the influence of volunteering on social connection, health and well-being in rural Australia. *Australian Journal or Rural Health, 33*(1): e13202. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.13202

Winterton, R., Skinner, M., & Walsh, K. (2025). Older people living in rural communities. In R. Serrat (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Later Life* (pp. 209-222). Bristol University Press.

Yea, S. (2021). Transnationalism unstuck: Precarious work and the transnational geographies of failed migration of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. *Global Networks, 22*(2), 259-273. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12343

Curriculum Vitae

Bas Dikmans was born on January 20, 1992, in Heerlen, the Netherlands. In 2011, he started his Bachelor's study 'Cultural Anthropology and Development Sciences' at the Radboud University (RU) in Nijmegen. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in 2015. In the same year, he started his Master's study in 'Latin American Studies' at the University of Amsterdam (UVA). His Master's thesis dealt with online memes, humor and political activism in Mexico. In 2017, he started his 2nd Master's study at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) in 'Cultures and Development Studies', which he completed in 2019. This time, his Master's thesis dealt with younger persons and cell phone use in a disadvantaged urban neighborhood in Paramaribo, Surinam. This study has been published as an article (see page 'Academic and non-academic output' for the reference). In 2021, he started his PhD research at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB) as part of the CIVEX-project ('Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Features, experiences and policy implications'), under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Sarah Dury (VUB), Prof. Dr. Liesbeth De Donder (VUB), and Prof. Dr. Rodrigo Serrat (UB). This dissertation is the end product of this PhD trajectory. He is co-editor of an edited book on participatory approaches, to be published by the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLab) in November 2025. During his PhD, he has also been involved in several non-academic working groups. He has been engaged in the working group "Gekleurde Wijsheid" (English: Colored Wisdom), which is a Brussels-based collaboration between socio-cultural organizations that aims to increase awareness about and celebrate the diversity of older adults in the Brussels metropolitan area. He has also been a member of the board of directors of EVA bxl, a social lab that initiates and supports innovative and co-creative projects to advance the lives and well-being of Brussels residents, from 2022-2025.

Portfolio

First-author academic papers

Dikmans, B., & Chacur, K. (2024). Rethinking life stories in the context of civic engagement: The life diagram and its potential for ageing and childhood research. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Linking ages: A dialogue between ageing and childhood research* (pp. 49–65). Routledge. (**Chapter 3** of this dissertation)

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., Torres, S., Ågård, P., Häkkinen, E., Celdrán, M., Nygård, M., & Serrat, R. (under review). Civic engagement in later life in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods: An environmental perspective. (under review in *Journals of Gerontology, Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*). (**Chapter 4** of this dissertation)

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., Serrat, R., Berdai Chaouni, S., & De Donder, L. (under review). A plurality of place: Towards a more inclusive understanding of older migrants' civic engagement. (under review in *Wellbeing, Space & Society*). (**Chapter 5** of this dissertation)

Dikmans, B., Serrat, R., Stegen, H., Vercauteren, T., De Donder, L., & Dury, S. (2025). "Life course of place": Older adults' social networks and informal help amidst urban change. *Urban Planning, 10*: 9909. (**Chapter 6** of this dissertation).

Dikmans, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (2025). Older people living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In R. Serrat (Ed.), *Civic engagement in later life* (pp. 192–208). Bristol University Press. (**Chapter 7** of this dissertation)

Dikmans, B. (2024). Covid-19, inequality and older people: Everyday life during the pandemic. C. Lewis, C. Philipson, S. Yarker and L. Lang, Bristol University Press: Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 2023, 160 pp., pbk £27.99, ISBN 13: 978-1447367444 (Book review).

Dikmans, B. (2021). Social media in urban Suriname: An ethnography on Christian Adolescents and their cell phones in Latour, Paramaribo. *Urbanities, 11*(1):18-35.

Dikmans, B. (2020). "Everyday racism," "white innocence," and postcolonial society: A deeper look into the Dutch cultural archive. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, *7*(1):46-66.

Co-authored academic papers

Häkkinen, E., Nyqvist, F., Serrat, R., Torres, S., **Dikmans**, B., Ågård, P., & Villar, F. (under review). Socioenvironmental influences on multidimensional civic engagement among older home care recipients.

Häussermann, F., Gryp, D., Schepers, W., **Dikmans**, B., Dury, S., & De Donder, L. (under review). How the neighbourhood-built environment shapes loneliness: A photo-elicitation study. (under review in *Health and Place*).

Näsman, M., Häkkinen, E., **Dikmans**, B., & Nyqvist, F. (unfinished manuscript). "Everything you experience is an asset to you": A life course perspective on civic engagement among older adults receiving home care services or living in a residential aged care facility.

Torres, S., Ågård, P., Serrat, R., Chacur Kiss, K., **Dikmans**, B., Häkkinen, E., Vercauteren, T., & Nyqvist, F. (accepted manuscript). Older migrants on civic engagement. (accepted for publication in the *Journal of Civil Society*).

Vercauteren, T., Dury, S., Serrat, R., Nyqvist, F., **Dikmans**, B., Pons-Vila, J., Van Regenmortel, S., & Brosens, D. The role of the living environment in the multidimensional civic engagement of older adults: A scoping review.

Societal output

Bas Dikmans, Hannelore Stegen, Toon Vercauteren. 'Het leven als een boek: Het belang van levensverhalen voor de sociale wetenschap'. March 20, 2022. (VUB Press release).

Liesbeth De Donder, Octavia Kint, **Bas Dikmans** and Lieselot Degraeve. 'Zorgzame buurten: Toegankelijke zorg in de buurt.' In Agora, 2023, Volume 3.

Vlaamse Ouderenraad. 'Drempels voor maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen'. In Actueel, Volume 5, 2. April 2024. Pages 11-13. (Interview with **Bas Dikmans** and Toon Vercauteren).

Vlaamse Ouderenraad. 'Omgevingsanalyse 2024'. Authored by Liesbeth De Donder, Sarah Dury, An-Sofie Smetcoren, Sofie Van Regenmortel, **Bas Dikmans**, Toon Vercauteren, Freya Häussermann, Ariane Vanbellingen, Lisa Van Hove, Ann Claeys, Bram Fret and Deborah Lambotte.

Gekleurde Wijsheid. 'Verschil verrijkt: Hoe ontmoetingscentra echt inclusief kunnen zijn'. Juni 2025. Released by Kenniscentrum WWZ vzw. Editorial team: Cynthia van Thiel, Mary Edna Lamnteh, **Bas Dikmans**, Lise Reniers, Mohamed Akdad and Lieselot Degraeve.

CIVEX team (Sarah Dury, **Bas Dikmans** and Toon Vercauteren). 'Beleidsnota CIVEX: Uitsluiting op het gebied van maatschappelijk engagement van een diverse oudere bevolking: Kenmerken, ervaringen en beleidsimplicaties' / 'Note de politique CIVEX: Exclusion dans l'engagement sociétal d'une population âgée diversifiée: Caractéristiques, expériences et implications politiques'. 2025. (CIVEX Policy brief, translated in Dutch and French). (**see next pages for the original English-language version**).

CIVEX team (Sarah Dury, **Bas Dikmans** and Toon Vercauteren). 'CIVEX-onderzoek naar het maatschappelijk engagement van diverse ouderen'. 2025. (CIVEX brochure). (**see next pages for the Dutch-language version**).

Liesbeth De Donder, Lieselot Degraeve, **Bas Dikmans,** Silke Marijnissen and Sofie Van Regenmortel. Edited book on participatory approaches (will be published in November, 2025).

- Chapter 2: Sarah Dury and **Bas Dikmans**. 'Participatie beter begrijpen: Typologieën, modellen en verwante begrippen'.
- Chapter 11: **Bas Dikmans**, Hannelore Stegen and Lieselot Degraeve. 'Levens-verhalen'.

Gekleurde Wijsheid. Cahier 'twee project jaren Gekleurde Wijsheid'. (Interview with **Bas Dikmans** about 'participation and older adults') (October 21, 2025).

Speaker at a conference

Dikmans, B. (June 8, 2022). 'Exclusion from Civic Engagement in Later Life: Studying Older Adults' Lived Experiences in Socio-economically Disadvantaged Neighborhoods'. Poster presentation at the 26th Nordic Congress of Gerontology (26NKG) in Odense, Denmark.

Dikmans, B. (July 7, 2022). 'Multi-level Exclusion in Civic Engagement in a Socio-economically Disadvantaged Neighbourhood in Brussels, Belgium: Taking a Life Course Perspective'. Oral presentation as part of a symposium ('Cross-national Perspectives on Civic Engagement in Later Life') at the 51st British Society of Gerontology (BSG) Annual Conference (online), together with Emilia Häkkinen, Thomas Scharf, Rodrigo Serrat and Toon Vercauteren.

Dikmans, B. and Peiró-Milián, I. (October 13, 2022). 'Civic Engagement in Later Life: What Qualitative Interviews Suggest'. Oral presentation during the CIVEX Results

Dissemination Seminar ('New Perspectives on Civic Engagement in Later Life') in Barcelona, Spain, together with the CIVEX-consortium.

Dikmans, B. (May 24, 2023). 'Civic Engagement in Later Life: A Life Course Perspective'. Oral presentation as part of a workshop ('Person-centred Integrated Care? Looking beyond Contemporary Needs, Wishes and Goals. A Workshop on the Importance of Working from a Life Course Perspective in Caring Neighbourhoods') during the 23rd International Conference on Integrated Care (ICIC23) in Antwerp, Belgium, together with Liesbeth de Donder, Stefan Goossens, Julie Guiette and Ariane Vanbellinghen.

Dikmans, B. (November 11, 2023). 'Exploring Informal Helping Behaviors among Long-term Older Residents of Disadvantaged Neighborhoods'. Oral presentation as part of a symposium ('Exclusion from Multidimensional Civic Engagement of Diverse Older Adults: A pan-European Perspective') at the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) Annual Conference in Tampa, USA, together with Fredrica Nyqvist, Sandra Torres and Toon Vercauteren.

Dikmans, B. (June 12, 2024). 'Multidimensional Civic Engagement of Older Persons living in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods across Europe'. Oral presentation as part of a symposium ('Civic Engagement in Old Age: Addressing Research Gaps by Focusing on the Diversity of Older Adults') at the 27th Nordic Congress of Gerontology (27NKG) in Stockholm, Sweden, together with Pernilla Ågård, Emilia Häkkinen, Inma Peiró-Milián and Sandra Torres.

Torres, S. and **Dikmans**, B. (September 13, 2024). 'Civic Engagement in Later Life: What can the Life Course tell us?'. Oral presentation as part of the Closing Conference of the CIVEX project in Brussels, Belgium, together with the CIVEX-consortium.

Dikmans, B. (June 26, 2025). 'Civic Engagement in Later Life in Disadvantaged Urban Neighbourhoods: An Environmental Perspective'. Oral presentation as part of a symposium ('Civic Engagement in Later Life: Advancing the Field') at the 54th British

Society of Gerontology (BSG) Annual Conference in Guildford, UK, together with Fredrica Nyqvist, Rodrigo Serrat, Sandra Torres and Toon Vercauteren.

Dikmans, B. (September 12, 2025). '"Een Levensloop van de Buurt": Sociale Netwerken en Burenhulp van Ouderen te midden van Stedelijke Veranderingen'. Oral presentation at the Vlaams-Nederlandse Sociaal Werk Conferentie: Conformeren of Transformeren? Sociaal Werk Onderzoek tussen Volgzaamheid en Verzet in Gent, Belgium.

Other mobility

September 21 to September 22, 2022: Conference "Linking Ages – How methods matter in childhood and age(ing)research", attended at the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Heidelberg, Germany, moderated by Antonia Krahl, Tabea Freutel-Funke and Anna Wanka.

February 18 to March 19, 2023: Research stay at the Universitat de Barcelona (UB), Spain, at the invitation of Prof. Dr. Rodrigo Serrat.

Appendix 8.1: CIVEX policy brief (English)

POLICY BRIEF

CIVEX: Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Features, experiences, and policy implications

Prepared by

The CIVEX team

November 2024

This document summarises the key policy messages arising from CIVEX (www.civex.eu), organised into **four main areas**: recognising the multidimensionality of civic engagement, addressing contextual influences, considering the life-course, and embracing the diversity of older people.

This policy brief highlights **four key recommendations** for enhancing civic engagement among diverse older populations:

1. **Recognize the Multidimensionality of Civic Engagement**: Broaden the definition of civic engagement to include informal help, associational, and digital contributions, while aligning opportunities with personal motivations to foster sustained participation.
2. **Enhance Accessibility and Equity**: Implement age-friendly and digitally inclusive programs, while promoting good practices across regions to address disparities in participation rates.
3. **Adopt a Life-Course Perspective**: Develop flexible policies that account for how life experiences, transitions, and inequalities influence civic engagement trajectories over time.
4. **Embrace Diversity in Older Populations**: Recognize and address the unique barriers faced by marginalized groups while valuing diverse perspectives on what civic engagement means.

These recommendations aim to create inclusive and equitable pathways for all older people to actively participate in their communities, shaping policies and practices that reflect their diverse contributions and needs.

Multidimensionality of civic engagement

Civic engagement is a multidimensional concept, encompassing a range of activities:

- Informal helping behaviours
- Associational membership
- Formal volunteering
- Political participation
- Digital engagement

These activities highlight the diversity of civic engagement, with each reflecting different ways people contribute to their communities and influence collective decisions.

Recognize Diverse Contributions: Policies must acknowledge all forms of civic engagement, from informal helping to political activism, ensuring activities align with personal interests. A multidimensional approach to civic engagement policies is therefore encouraged, incorporating diverse forms of engagement and enabling individuals to connect with causes and activities that resonate with them.

Ease Participation Barriers: Engaging in civic activities, such as informal caregiving, requires a commitment of time and energy, which often limits involvement in other forms of civic engagement. Policies must offer targeted support such as respite care, flexible schedules, or other support mechanisms for volunteers and participants in other civic activities.

Update Measurement Frameworks: A critical challenge in civic engagement is accurately measuring it, which is essential for understanding how to sustain participation throughout an individual's life. Traditional measures tend to emphasise formal participation (e.g., voting, volunteering) and may overlook more informal forms of engagement. To better understand civic engagement, measurement frameworks would benefit from being updated to capture informal, political, and digital forms of engagement. These activities often go unrecognised yet play a critical role in older people's civic contributions.

Contextual influences on late life civic engagement

Civic engagement in later life is shaped by individual characteristics (e.g., education, motivation), community factors, and broader societal systems like welfare policies. Participation rates vary across Europe, with Northern and Western countries leading. This disparity underscores the need to share successful strategies across regions. While national policies provide a foundation, local organizations and communities play a vital

role in creating accessible opportunities for older adults to engage.

Increase Accessibility: This includes implementing age friendly programs that encourage older people's participation in civic activities, such as volunteering or associational engagement and ensuring that civic engagement platforms (such as voting locations and community events) are physically accessible. The digital context is becoming increasingly relevant, especially for people with mobility issues and those living in remote areas. This is also true for civic engagement, meaning that these activities should be made accessible to everyone. Digital literacy programs that teach older people how to navigate technology can be implemented to increase inclusion.

Share Good Practices Across Europe: Encourage the exchange of good practices between countries to promote equal access, to civic activities for older people. While Northern and Western Europe show higher participation rates especially in volunteering associational membership and political participation, efforts should be made to support and develop civic engagement initiatives in regions where rates are lower. This includes tailoring programs to fit local contexts, enhancing support for local organisations, and fostering collaborations that adapt successful strategies to varying societal, cultural, and economic environments across Europe.

Life-course influences on late life civic engagement

To enhance civic engagement among older people, it is important to look beyond the current circumstances and acknowledge the influence that their life experiences may have on their engagement. Studying a person's life course increases our understanding of changes and adaptations over time in a person's life and helps us compile life events and life phases as impactful experiences that may affect civic engagement trajectories and levels of engagement.

Integrate Life-Course Perspectives: Policies should reflect how civic engagement evolves over time, influenced by historical and individual life paths. Developments over time in people's lives are not universal, but they can take on different patterns, depending on when and where a person lived. Current surveys fail to incorporate measures to identify and understand different paths and changes in civic engagement during the life course, making it difficult to relate to other micro-, meso- or macro-level variables. Building bridges between researchers focused on civic engagement at different life stages could help develop a more comprehensive and integrated view of the dynamics of civic engagement across the life course.

Accommodate Shifting Contexts: Influence of contextual factors and life phases. Contextual factors, such as those related to social, economic, political or environmental spheres, affect and vary throughout life, and what is called the "life course of place", changes in ecological systems over time. Individuals adapt to these shifts in unique ways, influencing how they approach civic engagement in the present and in the future, depending on the life paths a person navigates. Flexibility in civic engagement activities is essential to accommodate the different experiences older people face throughout their lives.

Address Cumulative Inequalities: Life course trajectories often align with social inequalities, with differing impacts based on gender, race, educational level, and other factors. Life events such as migration, marital status, and employment history may compound over time, multiplying effects on an individual's ability to engage civically. Community-based actors should be allocated resources to identify and address the cumulative effects of social inequalities on civic engagement. Policies should prioritize recruitment strategies that acknowledge the lifelong and fluctuating needs and diversity of the targeted population.

Older people's diversity

CIVEX focuses on the experiences of older persons that are seldom included in research about civic engagement in later life. By doing so, the project highlights the need for an inclusive approach in policy that incorporates the voice of these diverse groups of older persons and the different meanings that they attribute to their civic engagement.

Include Marginalized Voices: CIVEX shows how older migrants from non-European backgrounds give meaning to their civic engagement in various ways. When developing policy around civic engagement in later life, a broad approach should be adopted. The project urges policies aiming to promote civic engagement to be aware of the fact that older persons' definitions of what civic engagement entails may differ. For instance, older persons might want to contribute to society, have an ecological mindset, or they want to keep themselves updated. Through expanding the imagination of civic engagement in this way, policy and practice will be able to counter the often-limited perceptions of civic engagement that obscure the contributions of older persons and recognize that they might find civic engagement meaningful for a variety of reasons that have until now been ignored.

Balance Individual and Group Needs: CIVEX shows how older persons have a lot in common when it comes to what promotes and hinders engagement during the life

course. However, policies could certainly benefit from working around group-specific factors that have an impact. CIVEX therefore encourages policymaking that is able to manage the balancing act, which is about seeing that older persons are a diverse group with individual needs, desires and different understandings of what civic engagement means, while at the same time being aware that certain groups of older persons are more likely to face specific types of obstacles when it comes to their civic engagement.

Appendix 8.2: Brochure CIVEX (Nederlands)

CIVEX-onderzoek naar het maatschappelijk engagement van diverse ouderen

In 2022 en 2023 namen wij 60 levensverhaal-interviews af met diverse groepen ouderen (ouder dan 60 jaar) in België over hun maatschappelijk engagement.

We kwamen tot **4 conclusies**:

1. Het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen **kent verschillende vormen**
2. Het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen wordt beïnvloed door individuele kenmerken, maar ook **door de buurt en de samenleving**
3. Het maatschappelijk engagement **verandert door het leven**
4. **Een persoonlijke aanpak is nodig** om de drempels rond het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen te begrijpen

Meer weten over deze conclusies?
Kijk snel verder!

We spraken met vier groepen ouderen over hun maatschappelijk engagement

"Ik help mensen hier, bijvoorbeeld door boodschappen te doen als ik me goed voel. Ik heb eens voor zes mensen tegelijk boodschappen gedaan"
(Vrouw, 72 jaar, woonend in een woonzorgcentrum)

"De verpleegster komt twee keer in de week en op woensdag de kuisvrouw. Als ik naar mijn vereniging ga, dan komt iemand mij met de auto halen, want ik kom zelf niet meer makkelijk naar buiten"
(Vrouw, 89 jaar, ontvangt professionele zorg aan huis)

"Het feit dat je hier woont dwingt je om je ogen te openen: In het algemeen over alle problemen van mensen, maar ook over wat er gebeurt in een buurt, of het nu over drugs gaat, het straatvuil, of publieke veiligheid"
(Man, 65 jaar, woont in een achtergestelde stadsbuurt)

"In Syrië wordt maatschapellijk engagement eerder gezien als iets individueels. Er zijn weinig verenigingen. Hier zijn er juist veel verschillende verenigingen, bijvoorbeeld voor gehandicapten, voor jongeren, voor kinderen. Er zijn dus veel mogelijkheden om je te engageren"
(Man, 63 jaar, migreerde naar België vanuit een niet-Europees land)

Vragen?
Prof. dr. Sarah Dury: **sarah.dury@vub.be**
Bas Dikmans: **bas.dikmans@vub.be**
Toon Vercauteren: **toon.vercauteren@vub.be**

Nood aan meer info?
Kijk op:
www.sarlab.be of **www.civex.eu**

Het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen kent verschillende vormen

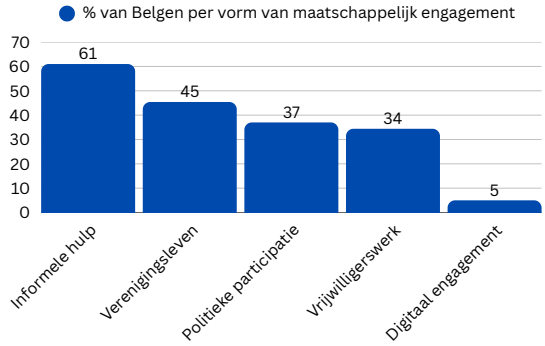
Ouderen zijn allereerst actief als vrijwilliger: onder andere actief zijn in voedselkeukens, het organiseren van taalateliers in lokale dienstencentra of contactpersoon zijn in buurthuizen

Ouderen hebben een politieke stem: stemmen voor verkiezingen, betrokken bij politieke partijen of lokale besturen, maar ook meedoen aan protestmarsen of het ondertekenen van petities

Ouderen zijn lid van verenigingen: van digitale cursussen tot schilderateliers en van sportclubs tot buurtcomités

Ouderen helpen hun medemens: buiten formele kaders om helpen ouderen hun buren, familieleden en vrienden, zoals boodschappen doen, op de kinderen passen, of een luisterend oor bieden

Ouderen zijn digitaal betrokken: door het delen van acties en ideeën op sociale media en door discussie te voeren over maatschappelijke thema's



Het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen wordt beïnvloed door individuele kenmerken, maar ook door de buurt en de samenleving

Iemand zijn **persoonlijke situatie**, denk aan een opleiding, intrinsieke motivatie, of sociaal-economische status, beïnvloedt zijn, haar of hun maatschappelijk engagement
"Ik moet zeggen dat ik niet zo maatschappelijk geëngageerd ben. Ik ben meer zo een thuisduif, ik blijf graag alleen"
(Vrouw, 84 jaar)

-

Maar ook de buurt waarin men woont speelt een rol!

Lokale verenigingen en buurtinitiatieven maken vaak het echte verschil. Zij zorgen ervoor dat ouderen makkelijk kunnen meedoen aan activiteiten en zich echt betrokken voelen.
"Mensen die hier zijn, zijn verwelkomend. In het restaurant, de mensen die komen en de mensen die hier werken, ze zijn heel aardig tegen iedereen en heten iedereen welkom. Ze staan open voor iedereen en nu ik hier vaker kom kent iedereen mij hier ook"
(Vrouw, 77 jaar, praat over het Lokaal Dienstencentrum in haar buurt)

-

Daarnaast bepalen regels en beleid van de overheid wat er mogelijk is op het gebied van maatschappelijk engagement.

Zo is het voor oudere migranten, vooral wanneer zij geen permanente verblijfsvergunning hebben, bijvoorbeeld niet altijd makkelijk om zich politiek te engageren, bijvoorbeeld door te stemmen:
"Ik kwam hier als buitenlander, ik kon niet stemmen. Maar nu heeft België niet-ingezetenen toegestaan om te stemmen, enkel voor de gemeente, maar nog niet voor het parlement"
(Man, 69 jaar, migreerde uit Congo naar België in de jaren '80)

Maatschappelijk engagement verandert door het leven

Om de bijdragen van ouderen te begrijpen, moeten we niet alleen kijken naar het hier en nu. **Levenservaringen spelen een grote rol.** Mensen veranderen en passen zich aan naarmate ze ouder worden, en grote gebeurtenissen, zoals *pensioen*, *verlies* of *de geboorte van een kind*, kunnen bepalen hoeveel en op welke manier men maatschappelijk betrokken blijft.

Verschillende grote levensgebeurtenissen, zoals *verhuizen naar een nieuw land*, *trouwen* of *financiële onzekerheid*, kunnen zich opstapelen en het lastiger maken om maatschappelijk mee te doen.

"Ik ben vanuit Griekenland naar België verhuisd toen ik met mijn man trouwde. Tijdens mijn huwelijk voelde ik mij geïsoleerd, omdat ik niets kon doen. Mijn man had een andere mentaliteit. Ik kon niet naar buiten gaan, ik kon nergens heen, zelfs niet naar het huis van mijn vrienden"
(Vrouw, 84 jaar, verhuisd vanuit Griekenland naar België in de jaren '60)

Maar: ook buurten veranderen!

Wat vroeger een bruisende wijk was, kan nu een onveilige buurt zijn.

Ouderen hebben elk hun eigen manier om met buurtverandering om te gaan. Sommigen blijven zich inzetten voor hun buurt, terwijl anderen zich juist terugtrekken.

Hoe een wijk verandert, heeft dus invloed op hoe mensen zich betrokken voelen en of ze zich blijven inzetten voor de samenleving.

"Ik had goed contact met mijn buren. We waren goede buren: als er iemand verhuisde, als er iemand ziek was, dan hielpen we elkaar. Maar bijna iedereen is vertrokken en dit is niet meer het geval met de nieuwe buren, ik ken de nieuwe buren niet eens"
(Vrouw, 70 jaar, wonend in een achtergestelde buurt)

Een persoonlijke aanpak is nodig om de drempels rond het maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen te begrijpen

CIVEX laat zien dat ouderen vaak tegen dezelfde dingen aanlopen als het gaat om maatschappelijk geëngageerd te zijn. Het is echter belangrijk om te erkennen dat **niet alle ouderen hetzelfde zijn**. Wat iemand motiveert of juist tegenhoudt om zich te engageren, kan verschillen van persoon tot persoon.

Daarom pleit CIVEX voor beleid dat zowel de overeenkomsten als de verschillen erkent. Door te begrijpen en in te spelen op wat er al beschikbaar is in hun omgeving, kunnen meer ouderen op hun eigen manier actief en betrokken blijven.

Daarnaast vinden ouderen vaak zelf al oplossingen voor hun problemen, zoals onderstaand voorbeeld van **Rita** (fictieve naam) laat zien.

Rita (vrouw, 89 jaar) woont al voor lange tijd in een achtergestelde stadsbuurt in Brussel. Ze is met haar man hierheen komen verhuizen vanuit Limburg, omdat haar man werk vond in de grootstad. Zij deed het huishouden en paste op de kinderen. Haar man is inmiddels overleden en haar kinderen zijn uit Brussel vertrokken. Door buurtverandering herkent ze haar buurt steeds minder. Ze heeft daarnaast ook een zorgvraag vanwege een afnemende lichamelijke gezondheid.

Desalniettemin zijn er nog een aantal verenigingen in haar buurt die interessante activiteiten organiseren. Ze wil nog graag naar buiten en meedoen in het verenigingsleven, maar kan dit niet alleen bewerkstelligen, omdat ze in een appartement woont met een zware deur die ze niet meer zelfstandig kan open doen. Een verpleger komt een aantal keer per week om haar te helpen met dagdagelijkse taken. Als de verpleger er is, belt ze ook regelmatig de vereniging op, zodat iemand **Rita** kan vervoeren, als er een activiteit is. Zo kan zij toch zo veel mogelijk meedoen met activiteiten, ook al is ze hiervoor afhankelijk van haar omgeving.

Abstract

Civic engagement has many positive effects on older adults' well-being and the communities they live in. Yet, most studies on civic engagement in later life focus on personal features. In this PhD dissertation, I aim to study older adults' diverse experiences of civic engagement in later life and to understand the civic engagement of older adults across time and place. In order to do so, I adopt an environmental and a life-course perspective. The studied populations include older adults in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and older adults with a non-European migration background, groups that are generally excluded from academic inquiry. Civic engagement in later life is defined as multidimensional, including formal forms of civic engagement (such as volunteering activities, associational membership and formal political engagement) and informal forms (such as informal help and informal political engagement, for instance participating in protests or signing petitions), incorporating digital civic engagement as well.

The dissertation's results deal with 1) how civic engagement should be defined as a broad concept, 2) how older adults' civic engagement is bi-directional: it is shaped by the neighborhood environment, while older adults also talk about contributing to changes in the neighborhood themselves, 3) how meanings and experiences of civic engagement vary from one group of older adults to another, and 4) how places change through time, which interweaves with older adults' civic engagement. Implications for policy and practice include, among others, the important role of neighborhood organizations, the significance of informal ties and helping behaviors, and how place is a plural notion, where older adults' civic engagement is concerned.

VUB VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL