

Review

How Places Shape Lives: Life Course Trajectories and Population Processes

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Abstract

This paper examines how place organizes life course trajectories and shapes population processes. It does so by structuring cumulative and unequal exposure to relationships, institutions, and opportunities over time. These spatially patterned exposures shape trajectories across the life course and contribute to population heterogeneity and stratification. Drawing on a life course perspective, the paper shows how place is constitutive of processes in domains including education, work, family life, and mobility, and how these experiences are implicated in divergence across cohorts and generations. It also considers how daily activity spaces, remembered environments, and symbolic attachments to place contribute to the formation of selves and to the reproduction of social and cultural meanings over time. The paper develops a conceptual account that treats place as a layered and cumulative dimension of life course processes, offering a more analytically coherent understanding of how spatial exposure shapes trajectories and population dynamics, and outlining implications for theory, research questions, and the measurement and modeling of place in life course research.

Keywords: life course; place; residential mobility; activity space; social relationships; population processes; opportunity structures

1. Introduction

How does place organize life course trajectories and population outcomes? Time naturally occupies a central place in theories and research on the life course, but lives are also lived in space. Experiences of growing up and growing older are shaped by when and where they occur—within particular neighborhoods, communities, institutions, and social settings. Life course trajectories, transitions, and turning points take place in concrete locations and alongside other people who inhabit those same places. Yet despite the obvious spatial grounding of human lives, place has occupied a less coherent position in life course and population research than time.

One of the enduring challenges for life course research is to more fully integrate temporal and spatial dimensions of human development. The field has been founded on strong concepts and approaches to tracing trajectories and transitions over the life course, particularly in relation to social norms, institutions, and historical change [1–5]. Insights about place, however, have developed across multiple fields—including geography, environmental gerontology, public health, and spatial sociology—but have not been integrated into a coherent whole or brought into sustained dialogue with life course and population research. As a result, place is often incorporated into research without a common conceptual framework, even though related fields have produced extensive insights into



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spatial processes and their consequences. This fragmentation also limits understanding of how individual life course experiences accumulate into broader population patterns of heterogeneity and inequality.

Place matters not only because it shapes the conditions under which lives unfold, but also because it informs how people imagine their futures and possible selves. Through cultural narratives, personal experience, and social comparison, places become linked to visions of who one might become, where opportunities seem possible, and which selves feel attainable or foreclosed. People often describe particular places as sites of aspiration—places where they could finally be or become themselves—as well as places they avoid because they symbolize things they fear, reject, or believe are incompatible with who they are or hope to be. These meanings are not merely personal. They are embedded in wider social and institutional contexts that link individual biographies to broader structures and population processes.

A further challenge for life course theory is the need to make levels of analysis—and their interdependencies—explicit. As formalized in Bernardi, Huinink, and Settersten's life course cube, life course processes operate across interacting levels that link individual states and biographies with social relationships, institutions, and broader socio-cultural contexts [6,7]. Place is implicated across these levels simultaneously: as a biographical condition, a feature of opportunity structures, and a source of cumulative exposure that interacts with individual resources and vulnerabilities. Seen through this lens, place cannot be treated as a single-level attribute, and its effects on life trajectories are differentiated, durable, and consequential for population heterogeneity. This multilevel framing helps explain why work on place remains dispersed across disciplines, organized around different scales, methods, and analytic vocabularies.

This paper addresses these challenges by arguing that place should be understood as a constitutive element of life course processes, not just the settings in which they unfold. Drawing on illustrative cases and social observations, the paper examines place as a layered and cumulative influence on trajectories, transitions, and social relationships, and as a mechanism linking individual lives to population processes. This paper is not a systematic review of all the relevant literature. Rather, it offers a conceptually driven analysis grounded in long-term scholarly observation, drawing selectively on life course research and adjacent fields to bring into closer dialogue strands of scholarship that have often developed in parallel. Its contribution lies not in comprehensive coverage, but in developing a more analytically coherent and unified account of how place operates across trajectories and population processes, and in clarifying how treating place as constitutive reframes the analysis of life course dynamics.

2. Place in Life Course Phases and Transitions

Life course trajectories are typically defined through roles, transitions, and turning points in time, but these processes are also spatially structured. When individuals divide their lives into “chapters,” those chapters are often structured around entry into and exit from particular places, reflecting the close coupling of spatial contexts and role transitions across the life course. Such moves frequently coincide with changes in education, employment, family roles, and social position, and they can orient subsequent pathways—for example, by shaping credentials earned, social networks formed, or access to particular labor and housing markets.

In my own case, my adult life thus far can be divided into years spent in my Wisconsin hometown, Chicago, Berlin, Cleveland, and Corvallis. These moves corresponded to transitions from student to postdoctoral scholar to professor, and each location brought with it a distinct set of institutional settings, social networks, family experiences and daily

routines. In recalling these periods, what come to mind are not only roles, but concrete spaces—dormitories, apartments, and homes; neighborhood parks, cafés, and stores; and classrooms, libraries, and offices. These places were central sites of work, learning, and social interaction. Although individuals are not always consciously aware of it, the places associated with major life phases become integral to how lives are organized, directed, and understood.

Role transitions often reconfigure individuals' connections to space. Becoming a parent, for instance, links people to settings they might otherwise not encounter, such as schools, pediatric clinics, and parent organizations, while also influencing residential preferences related to school districts or proximity to kin. Changes in partnership status or family structure may prompt moves—to larger or smaller dwellings, different neighborhoods, or new communities—while retirement or job loss can sever daily ties to workplaces that once structured time, identity, and social contact. In each case, changes in roles both reshape spatial attachments and alter how places are experienced.

Residential moves may also be triggered by circumstances beyond individual control, such as a partner's job transfer, visa restrictions, institutional assignments (e.g., military service or academic appointments), or eligibility requirements tied to education, employment, or care systems. Even when relocation is desired, it can be disruptive, particularly when it entails leaving behind established social ties or familiar environments. At the same time, moves can open—or foreclose—opportunities by expanding or narrowing access to employment options, educational institutions, housing markets, and social networks. In this way, residential mobility both reflects and reinforces life course processes, often at critical moments of transition [8].

These dynamics underscore the bidirectional relationship between place and the life course. Places condition when and how transitions are experienced—by influencing timing, sequencing, and exposure—while transitions reorganize individuals' relationships to place. Across the life course, this reciprocal reorganization of roles and spatial attachments differentiates trajectories, setting cumulative processes in motion that become visible later in life and in population-level patterns.

3. Place and Daily Spatial Routines

Daily life is organized through recurring spatial routines that structure who and what individuals encounter across settings. These “daily rounds” define the practical scope of individuals' lived worlds and organize access to social interaction, services, and opportunities. The concept of *activity space* designates this dimension of everyday spatial exposure and connects to a broader literature on activity space and lived spatial experience [9–11]. Although digital spaces and online interactions increasingly shape daily life—through remote work, virtual meetings, and online services—the focus here is on physical life space, where mobility, access, and constraint are directly mediated by bodies, infrastructure, and place.

Activity space varies widely across individuals and over the life course. For some, daily life may span multiple neighborhoods, cities, or even countries, reflecting high levels of physical mobility and access to transportation, resources, and institutional privileges. For others, physical life space may be far more circumscribed, constrained by health conditions, economic resources, caregiving responsibilities, or features of the built environment. These differences are not merely descriptive: they reflect systematic patterns of opportunity and constraint that organize daily experience and can accumulate.

Health and functional capacity play a central role in structuring life space. Individuals with physical limitations or cognitive decline may face increasing restrictions on where they can go, when they can go, and whether they can go alone—for example, no longer

driving, needing accompaniment, avoiding stairs or long distances, or restricting outings to certain times of day. Such constraints alter not only physical mobility, but also autonomy, social participation, and sense of control in everyday life. A growing body of research in gerontology, health geography, and disability studies has examined how functional limitations and environmental conditions interact to shape individuals' life space and daily mobility [12,13]. Life space is not only shaped by individual capacity but also by the environments in which individuals are embedded. Rural settings often involve greater distances between destinations and fewer transportation options, while dense urban environments may pose challenges related to crowding, safety, cost, or navigability.

The built environment further conditions daily life space across the life course. Features such as accessible sidewalks and benches, safe street crossings, adequate lighting, and reliable public transportation can either enable or restrict everyday movement. A neighborhood with nearby services, frequent transit, and walkable streets affords a very different range of daily activities than one that requires long distances or car dependence. These structural features interact with personal resources and capacities, contributing to stratification in exposure to social, physical, and institutional environments.

Over the life course, differences in daily exposure shape divergent patterns of activity, social engagement, and well-being. Individuals with expansive life spaces are more likely to maintain diverse social contacts, participate in community life, and access services, while those with constrained life spaces may experience shrinking social worlds, reduced engagement, and greater reliance on others for basic needs. These cumulative patterns are especially consequential in later life, when physical mobility limitations are more common and the consequences of isolation or dependence become more pronounced.

Efforts to create "age-friendly" or "age-integrated" environments (e.g., cities or universities) reflect growing recognition of the importance of daily life space [14–16]. While much of this work focuses on accommodating older adults, a life course perspective underscores that spatial accessibility and inclusivity matter at all ages. Walkable neighborhoods support children's independent spatial mobility, reliable transit expands opportunities for adolescents and young adults, and flexible housing and community spaces facilitate caregiving and role transitions throughout adulthood. Environments encountered earlier in life shape habits, expectations, and trajectories that carry forward, influencing how later-life constraints are experienced and managed.

Changes in residence later in life—such as downsizing, relocation after widowhood, or moves into assisted living or other care settings—often leave individuals acutely aware of how deeply prior spaces are embedded in daily routines. Adjusting to a new environment can be disorienting, particularly when familiar routes, cues, and routines are disrupted or when physical or cognitive capacities are limited. These experiences underscore that life space is not simply a matter of physical layout, but of accumulated familiarity and embodied knowledge developed through repeated engagement with particular places.

From a population perspective, variation in life space reflects broader inequalities in mobility, access, and exposure. Understanding these routines has important implications for research and measurement. Traditional indicators of residence capture where people live, but not how they move through space, which places they routinely encounter, or which environments are effectively accessible to them. Approaches that attend to activity spaces, daily mobility, and lived exposure—for example, through travel diaries, mobility tracking, or detailed time-use data—offer promising ways to link individual experience to population-level patterns of stratification and inequality [17,18].

These daily arrangements exist within historically produced spatial regimes that can shift abruptly, reorganizing the spatial organization of life domains across the life course. A defining commitment of the life course perspective is the analysis of historical

events and social change—making it indispensable for understanding how the spatial organization of lives is produced, disrupted, and reorganized. As classic life course research has shown, the twentieth century was marked by a profound spatial differentiation of life domains [3,19,20]. Over time, households ceased to function as the primary sites of education and economic production, as schooling and paid work were relocated into specialized institutions and spaces outside family life. This historical separation reshaped daily routines, role expectations, and the spatial distribution of responsibilities across the life course, establishing powerful norms about where different domains of life should take place.

The early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic vividly revealed the historical contingency—and fragility—of these spatial arrangements [21]. After more than a century of institutional separation, life abruptly swung back toward an earlier spatial model in which education, work, and family life were once again compressed into shared domestic space. What made this period especially difficult was not only disruption but forced togetherness: households were suddenly required to absorb responsibilities and demands that modern social organization had long worked to separate. Similar spatial reconfigurations occur during economic depressions, when households collapse or double up, or during periods of affluence, when expanded resources open new possibilities for housing, living arrangements, and mobility. Over the twentieth century, major advances in science, technology, medicine, transportation, and race and gender equity altered the very terms of life. Together, these and other changes make clear that the spatial organization of everyday life is both historically contingent and consequential for how domains of activity are distributed across the life course.

4. Place and Opportunity Structures

Life course trajectories unfold within layered spatial contexts that structure access to opportunities and condition life chances. Neighborhoods, cities, states, regions, and nations differ markedly in the resources, institutions, and markets they offer, and these differences open and close pathways across education, work, housing, family formation, and health. Such place-based opportunity structures are shaped by historical processes and political economy, with enduring consequences for life chances [22]. Cumulative exposure to these conditions contributes to divergence in trajectories and to heterogeneity in circumstances and well-being across the life course, consistent with cumulative processes emphasized in life course research [4]. This process can be understood as what I refer to as *spatially structured cumulative inequality*.

Education provides a clear illustration of how place conditions opportunity. The quality of early childhood education and of primary and secondary schools is closely tied to local tax bases, socioeconomic and racial segregation, and state-level investment [23]. Students' academic standing is therefore a function of both individual performance and the social composition and resources of the schools they attend—for example, whether peers are predominantly college-bound and whether advanced coursework and other institutional supports for student success are available [24]. College admissions practices that account for class rank, school characteristics, or the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced lunch implicitly recognize that place of origin structures educational opportunity long before the point of application. These early spatial inequalities channel trajectories into higher education, credentialing, and labor-market positioning [25,26].

Opportunities continue to be stratified by place in higher education and employment. The location and prestige of colleges and universities influence both how degrees are valued and the networks into which graduates are incorporated and the geographic labor markets into which they are funneled [27]. Workplaces likewise vary in their status, stability, and

ladders of social and economic mobility—whether jobs offer benefits, predictable schedules, training opportunities, or prospects for advancement—producing systematic differences in job quality and precarity across labor markets [28]. Recent evidence from job postings further shows that skill requirements and hiring practices vary sharply across firms and regions, reinforcing labor-market segmentation and unequal returns to education [29]. Early employment in stable, resource-rich settings can set in motion cumulative processes that advantage later trajectories, while unstable or precarious employment can constrain future options. Because educational and occupational institutions are embedded in particular regions, choices made at one phase of the life course often channel individuals toward specific labor markets, shaping where adult lives are launched and where people are likely to remain.

Housing occupies a central position at the intersection of place and life chances. Residential location shapes access to schools, employment, services, and social networks, while housing markets translate place-based inequalities into durable economic advantage or disadvantage through mechanisms such as equity accumulation, appreciation, and exclusion [30]. For current cohorts of older adults in the United States, for example, homeownership has been a major source of wealth, buffering against economic shocks and supporting well-being in later life, though access to these benefits has been highly unequal and structured by race and cohort [31]. However, housing insecurity is closely intertwined with labor-market instability, compounding disadvantages for those in precarious employment [32]. Rising costs, credit regimes, and employment insecurity mean that future cohorts are unlikely to experience the same housing-derived protections. Moreover, places themselves change—sometimes dramatically—through processes such as gentrification, deindustrialization, or the arrival or departure of major employers, with profound consequences for residents' opportunities and security.

Political and policy contexts further differentiate life chances across space. Whether a person lives in a politically progressive or conservative jurisdiction can affect access to reproductive health care, labor protections, public assistance programs, environmental regulation, and educational curricula, with direct consequences for well-being across the life course. For example, state decisions regarding Medicaid expansion influence access to health care; variations in reproductive health policy affect the timing and feasibility of family formation; and differences in labor regulation shape job security, benefits, and workplace protections.

These political-legal environments also influence who is drawn to particular places and who is pushed away. Individuals and families may seek out locations where their values, identities, or family forms are publicly recognized and protected, while others leave places where they feel constrained, surveilled, or excluded. Policies affecting LGBTQ+ rights, immigration enforcement, school governance, or environmental protection can make some communities feel welcoming and others inhospitable, shaping migration decisions and residential sorting. These political geographies contribute to differences in community composition and reinforce place-based trajectories through the options, protections, and risks embedded in local and state policy environments [33].

Place also shapes family formation and family life. Patterns of marriage, childbearing, and partnership vary across regions and communities, as do norms regarding family diversity and belonging. Access to sexual and reproductive health services differs substantially by state and locality, influencing the timing and sequencing of family transitions. Decisions about where families live are shaped by concerns about schools, childcare, safety, and proximity to kin. For many, place also conditions whether families feel supported or marginalized—for example, for LGBTQ+ families or families of color moving into homogeneous or politically hostile communities. These dynamics link place to family trajectories

in ways that reverberate across generations, as children grow up within the environments, institutions, and norms associated with where their families are situated.

Place conditions exposure to immediate health risks and resources through the environments in which daily life unfolds. Access to clean drinking water, air quality, exposure to pollutants, noise, and neighborhood safety vary widely across communities [34,35]. Residents of some places contend with contaminated water systems, poor air quality, proximity to highways or industrial sites, or chronic exposure to agricultural chemicals, while others live in environments with fewer hazards and greater environmental protections. Violence, traffic danger, and perceptions of safety further shape whether individuals feel able to move through their neighborhoods, spend time outdoors, or engage in everyday activities.

These place-based exposures are not episodic; they are woven into daily life and accumulate across the life course [36]. Children who grow up in areas with environmental hazards, limited green space, or unsafe streets carry those exposures forward, just as adults who spend decades in polluted or unsafe environments experience compounding risks to health and well-being. Access to mitigating resources—such as nearby health care facilities, environmental regulation, public investment, and social support—also differs by place and is conditioned by state and local policy regimes [37]. Together, these conditions link everyday environments to population-level patterns of morbidity and mortality, making health a central pathway through which place connects individual life course trajectories to broader population inequalities.

The social composition of places further conditions opportunity and experience. Communities differ in the age, gender, racial and ethnic, educational, and income distributions of their residents, shaping the relationships that form and the environments individuals inhabit. For young families, the presence of other children, parks, and schools influences daily life and social integration; while for older adults, the availability of age peers, services, and informal support networks affect experiences of aging, given differences in longevity and the prevalence of age-segregated housing and living arrangements. What it means to live—and to grow older—in a place is therefore shaped by its social and institutional composition, not solely by individual preference. These processes establish place as a central organizer of life chances, linking institutional arrangements and market processes to cumulative inequalities observed across the life course and at the population level.

5. Place and Relationships

Social relationships are formed, sustained, and transformed within spatial contexts. Many of the people who become significant in an individual's life are encountered in particular locations—neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and communities—where repeated co-presence creates opportunities for connection. I use the term *place-bound linked lives* to describe how such interdependencies are anchored in specific spatial contexts. Even beyond close relationships, daily spatial routines generate forms of social familiarity. Individuals may come to recognize others who share the same rhythms of place, such as regulars at a café or neighbors encountered on daily walks. When such figures disappear, their absence can be felt—underscoring the significance of place in both structuring interaction and providing a sense of social continuity in everyday life.

Looking back across their lives, individuals often become conscious of the role of chance in the formation of relationships: Had they not been in a particular place at a particular time, they might not have met a spouse, formed key friendships, encountered mentors, or accessed pivotal opportunities. From a population perspective, however, such moments of “chance” are patterned rather than random. Who is likely to be in particular places at particular phases of life is shaped by social stratification and institutional sorting. For example, patterns of encounter are organized by attendance at elite versus

less resourced schools, where individuals are exposed to different peers, networks, and opportunities, and by growing up in advantaged versus disadvantaged neighborhoods that similarly vary in their social composition and institutional resources. These patterned encounters link spatial context and timing to the formation of life pathways.

Social relationships formed in particular places are of course not fixed. Leaving a place often means leaving behind people who are important, even when relationships are sustained through digital or other forms of communication. Such connections rarely substitute for the shared routines and embodied co-presence of everyday place-based interaction. Relationships anchored in earlier places may persist in ways that reflect former roles and settings—teachers remembering students as they were in classrooms, parents continuing to view adult children through memories of childhood, or adult children holding onto images of their parents shaped by earlier phases of life. In these cases, spatial separation does not simply create distance; it can impede the ongoing recalibration of relationships, leaving people to understand one another through outdated expectations and identities.

The same spatial forces that bring lives together can also pull them apart. Through ongoing processes of linking and unlinking—what I have elsewhere called *unlinked lives*—relationships may weaken, dissolve, or be reconfigured through life transitions and spatial separation [38]. Family relationships are especially sensitive to such spatial arrangements. Decisions about where to live are frequently influenced by proximity to parents, children, and other kin, and are often shaped by networked constraints on choice, as obligations to family members delimit which options are feasible, desirable, or even imaginable.

When adults become parents themselves, closeness to their parents (now grandparents) may enter into the calculus of relocation, both to facilitate childcare and to maintain intergenerational bonds. Grandparents, in turn, often seek to live near grandchildren in later life, motivated by caregiving, emotional connection, or a desire to remain embedded in family routines. Population research shows that, despite high geographic mobility, many older parents and adult children live relatively close to one another, reflecting life course preferences and constraints that prioritize familial proximity [39]. Recent demographic projections nonetheless suggest growing gaps in the availability of family care as kin networks become more attenuated and spatially dispersed, with important implications for future cohorts [40].

In later life, health, care needs, and economic resources increasingly influence where people can and choose to live. Migration in later life illustrates how place and relationships intersect. For healthy and resource-rich retirees, moves are often oriented toward leisure, climate, or amenities. For those with greater health needs or fewer resources, migration is more likely to be directed toward assistance, including proximity to family members who can provide care. These patterned forms of later-life mobility reflect underlying inequalities in resources and constraints that shape where older adults live, the relationships available to them, and their social integration or isolation.

Institutional arrangements can also profoundly shape social ties. Care systems and housing structures may separate long-married partners when their needs diverge—for example, when one partner requires memory care while the other does not, or when regulatory or licensing requirements limit co-residence. Such separations are not merely personal tragedies; they reflect institutional sorting processes that prioritize care needs over relational histories. At the same time, new relationships may form within residential and care settings, illustrating both the fragility and the resilience of social connection in later life.

Places also connect individuals to those who are no longer living. Cemeteries, family homes, inherited properties, and community institutions anchor relationships materially in space, linking generations across time. Living in or returning to such places sustains intergenerational ties and reinforces a sense of continuity, even as individual lives change. In this way, place operates not only as a setting for interaction, but as a medium through which social relationships are formed, reconfigured, and carried forward across the life course and across generations.

6. Symbolic Dimensions of Place

Beyond sites of residence or activity, places function as repositories of meaning expressed through objects, symbols, and practices. Individuals fill personal spaces with belongings that reflect identities and life histories—photographs of family and friends; books, art, and music that signal values and interests; objects that reflect personal milestones or relationships. These items do more than decorate space. They anchor identities, organize daily life, and connect past experiences to present selves through socially learned, embodied practices of place attachment [41]. This perspective also connects to research on place identity and meaning in geography [42] and on place attachment in ageing-in-place studies and environmental gerontology [43,44].

Personal belongings often serve as material traces of place-based experience. Growth marks on doorways, or trees planted to commemorate births or deaths, embedding life events in physical space. When individuals leave a place, transitions may be marked through final visits, the exchange of gifts, or the preservation of objects that commemorate shared time. Souvenirs are literal tokens of place, carried forward as reminders of where one has been and who one has been in particular settings. Through these practices, place becomes portable, affecting identity and attachment even after physical separation.

Symbols attached to place also operate at broader social and institutional levels. Nations, regions, and communities signal belonging or exclusion through borders, language, and law. Legal documents such as passports, residency permits, and driver's licenses regulate physical and spatial mobility and confer legitimacy, determining who is authorized to occupy particular spaces. In later life, the loss of a driver's license is not just a functional marker of declining capacity; it is a symbolic loss of autonomy and independence, with direct consequences for daily mobility, social participation, and self-understanding. These symbolic dimensions of place therefore condition access, status, and agency across the life course.

These symbolic dimensions become especially salient in institutional contexts associated with aging. Anticipated moves to assisted living or nursing homes are often feared not only because of changes in care arrangements, but because such places may represent a loss of home, identity, and belonging. Efforts to create person- and family-centered care environments reflect recognition of the importance of familiar objects, routines, and spatial personalization, as well as the potential benefits—and risks—of aging in place [45]. At the same time, institutional constraints—including limited space, safety regulations, and standardized room layouts—often restrict the number and kinds of personal belongings that can be brought into these settings. Transitions into institutional care can therefore entail losses of privacy, autonomy, and continuity, as individuals are often required to relinquish personal belongings that previously anchored identity and daily life [46]. These losses influence how individuals adapt to later-life transitions and contribute to variation in institutional experience.

These meanings are especially consequential at the end of life, when decisions about care, dying, and remembrance are closely tied to place. Preferences about where to die—often at home and surrounded by loved ones—reflect deeply held meanings attached

to particular spaces. At the same time, certain places are actively feared. Many people dread prolonged dying in nursing homes or institutional care settings not only because they are not home, but because of what those settings represent. Decisions about whether to bring hospital equipment into the home or to relocate care elsewhere are driven by symbolic meanings of place alongside clinical considerations. After death, choices about burial sites or the scattering of ashes often center on places associated with important life experiences, anchoring memory and identity in space and linking generations across time.

From a population perspective, symbolic attachments to place have concrete consequences. They influence decisions about whether and when people move, how they respond to institutional placement, and whether they are able to maintain continuity of identity amid life course transitions. Crucially, access to environments that allow for personalization, stability (e.g., “aging in place”), and choice is unevenly distributed, reflecting broader social and institutional inequalities and determining who is able to resist or adapt to spatial and institutional constraints across the life course.

7. Implications for Theory, Population Research, and Measurement

From a theoretical standpoint, the paper underscores the importance of understanding place as a dynamic component of life course processes rather than as a static backdrop in empirical research. Much existing research treats place at discrete moments—often through cross-sectional measures of local structure or composition—while giving less systematic attention to how exposure to places shifts over time and is structured through roles, relationships, and institutional contexts. A life course perspective instead emphasizes the timing, sequencing, and duration of place-based exposures, together with path-dependent processes through which earlier environments continue to orient identity, social relationships, and later opportunities and constraints, even after individuals have left those places.

These theoretical insights point directly to challenges—and opportunities—for measurement. Standard approaches in population research typically rely on current residence or a limited number of residential locations, obscuring the cumulative and relational nature of place-based exposure. More systematic use of residential histories, collected retrospectively or prospectively, would allow researchers to trace trajectories of place across the life course and link them to transitions in education, work, family life, and health [47]. Life-history calendars and linked household or couple histories are especially valuable for situating residential moves within broader life course dynamics, making it possible to identify the conditions under which moves are experienced as opportunity-enhancing, disruptive, or constraining [48].

Residential location alone, however, provides an incomplete account of how individuals engage with place. As the discussion of life space and daily rounds illustrates, understanding exposure requires attention to both where people live and how they move through space, which environments they encounter, the roles they occupy in those settings, and the forces that direct movement. Measures of activity space, daily mobility, and spatial exposure—drawing on travel diaries, time-use data, GPS-enabled devices, or smartphone-based sensing—provide increasingly fine-grained accounts of how people engage with places in everyday life [49–51]. Recent applications of latent class and trajectory approaches extend this work by tracing life-course patterns of spatial exposure and their links to vulnerability and segregation in geographical context [52,53]. These approaches illuminate how access to services, institutions, and social interaction varies even among individuals who share the same residential location and they are particularly useful for examining inequality.

Some dimensions of place that are central to life course processes remain difficult to capture using conventional quantitative indicators of location or exposure, including

symbolic attachments to place, embodied familiarity with environments, and meanings associated with earlier locations [54]. These dimensions influence how people make decisions and adapt to life course transitions, including moves into institutional settings. Qualitative approaches—such as in-depth interviews, residential narratives, life-history elicitation, or analyses of personal objects and domestic spaces—are essential for probing these dimensions. For example, asking interviewees to share objects or mementos associated with places that mattered to them (such as where they were during key life transitions or turning points) can surface meanings and attachments that are difficult to access with standard survey measures. When integrated with population-level data, such methods can inform the development of survey items and analytic constructs that better reflect how place is experienced, interpreted, and carried forward.

Analytically, these measurement strategies invite greater attention to heterogeneity in place-based trajectories. Rather than treating mobility or stability as uniform phenomena, researchers can examine how patterns of movement, attachment, and exposure differ by social origins, cohort, gender, family structure, and institutional contexts. Linking life course data on place to population-level outcomes—such as health, wealth, caregiving arrangements, and mortality—offers a powerful way to examine how spatial inequalities emerge, accumulate, and are reproduced across generations.

These implications underscore the need for clearer theorization and more integrated measurement of how location, movement, meaning, and institutions jointly structure life course trajectories and population heterogeneity, especially through meso-level configurations of social relations and spatial contexts—what Spini describes as *geosocial embeddedness* and *geosocial activity spaces* [55,56].

8. Conclusions

This paper has argued that place is a constitutive element of life course processes, not simply a setting in which they occur. Across the sections, place has been shown to condition opportunities, relationships, and exposure to risks and protections. These processes operate over time and across domains, linking individual biographies to broader population patterns in ways that are not always fully specified in much life course and population research.

Seen through this lens, the significance of place lies not in any single location or life phase, but in how spatial contexts orient trajectories. Early environments influence what comes to be seen as normal, possible, or out of reach; subsequent moves reinforce, redirect, or constrain those orientations; and later-life experiences reflect the interaction of earlier spatial exposures with changing roles, institutions, and bodies. Decisions about education, work, family life, and care are thus grounded in place in ways that affect long-term outcomes in health, wealth, and social connection.

The analysis also highlights how place structures social relations across the life course. In doing so, it extends recent attention to *networked lives* by showing how social ties are both relationally structured and spatially anchored, reconfigured, and constrained over time [57,58]. Family dispersion, later-life migration, and care arrangements are not only personal matters but population-level processes shaped by housing markets, policy regimes, and institutional design. These dynamics help explain variation in caregiving capacity, vulnerability, and well-being in later life.

Equally important are the symbolic dimensions of place. Homes, neighborhoods, and culturally meaningful sites carry relationships forward as people grow up, grow older, and die. Personal belongings, legal statuses, and institutional environments shape whether individuals experience continuity or disruption as they navigate life course transitions. Because access to choice, personalization, and stability differs, symbolic attachments to

place also illuminate how inequality is lived and negotiated—not only materially, but through belonging, recognition, and control.

These insights underscore the value of engaging place more explicitly and more systematically in population and life course research, including integration across sociological, demographic, and geographic research. Doing so requires moving beyond static location measures toward approaches that account for trajectories of residence, everyday spatial routines, institutional contexts, and the meanings people attach to the places they inhabit. It also requires attending to how political, economic, and environmental conditions embedded in place shape exposure to opportunity and risk.

By focusing on place as an organizing force in lives and populations, this paper develops an integrative analytic perspective on how place shapes experience across the life course. Making place visible in theory, measurement, and analysis is not just a matter of adding spatial variables, but accounting for how movement, attachment, and constraint are patterned. Such an approach provides a clearer basis for understanding what it means to live lives through time—and through place.

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