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## Refashioning One's Place in Time: Stories of Household Downsizing in Later Life

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### Abstract

Older adults face a daunting task: while continuing engagements in multiple relationships, investment in their own and others' futures, and developing life interests and capacities, they also reexamine and sometimes reconfigure the place where their social lives and objects are housed. Some relocate, downsize, to a new smaller place and reducing possessions to ensure an environment supportive of their capacities and desired daily activities. This article examines how key contours of the experiences of place during residential downsizing are infused with unexpectedly heightened awareness and cultivation of one's sense of place in multiple timeframes. In a discovery mode, the downsizing stories of 40 older adults in southeast Michigan are examined. Findings indicate conflicting temporalities and the natures of cognitions related to decision-making and thinking about being leave-taking and being in place. Findings also highlight in particular how making sense of one's place is predicated on notions of *its time*, of being *on time* and downsizing *on time*. Further, these characterizations of the lived worlds of older adults' modes of conceptualizing the nature of downsizing show how an understanding of the meaningfulness of place in later life relocations requires a layered sense of home as places-in multiple timelines.

### Keywords

aging; place creation; time; housing transition among elderly; creativity; narrative

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The other phase of course is leaving the house with 50 years, over 50 years, and all our possessions that we had in there. And, it's been pretty difficult. Because, trying to decide what you want to take with you, and everything, it took a lot. (Moir, married, 76 years old, Caucasian)

### Introduction

The later life task of residential downsizing represents a relatively new experience for contemporary research. We define downsizing as a residential move to smaller quarters and the necessary reduction of personal possessions consonant with Ekerdt and colleagues (Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, & Bowen, 2004; Ekerdt & Sergeant 2006). Despite the swelling

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number of older adults reaching late life, gerontologists, social scientists, and service providers have only cursorily dealt with this process. Related research has contributed insight into some features of older persons' moves into new environments (Rowles, 1987, 1993; Rubinstein, 1989; Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992), but we argue that by virtue of its occurring in the private life spaces of individual homes and not engaging institutional relationships (for example, as implicated in selling a house and moving into a long term care or skilled nursing facility) that later life downsizing in the community has not gained the significant scholarly attention it deserves. Today, despite rich data on financial, demographic, and architectural features, we lack insights into what comprises the experiences of doing one's downsizing, what is the nature and kinds of focal concerns that inform the experience, and how the changes to residence and material artifacts are placed within wider social life.

### Housing Relocation in Later Life

Our knowledge of downsizing is situated alongside insights from research on retirement and late life migration (Litwak & Longino, 1987), and population-based research on housing relocation. Some generalizations can be made, Bayer and Harper (2000) estimate that five-year residential mobility rates for those aged 75+ are at least 12%, and may run as high as 30% (Sergeant, Ekerdt, & Chapin, 2010). Many moves are unexpected (Oswald & Wahl, 2004). Analysis of persons aged 65+ using the Health and Retirement Survey data reports only 20% of moves were anticipated 2 years earlier (Sergeant & Ekerdt, 2008). A major impetus is a health event (Oswald & Rowles, 2006). Wolf and Wilmoth's (2010) analysis of health shocks and relocation showed that having a stroke or a hip fracture were the two strongest independent predictors of housing relocation in later life.

Whether or not an older adult eventually moves into a more supported living environment, the consensus is that older adults prefer to age in place. Bayer and Harper (2000) found that 92% of adults aged 65 to 74 years wished to remain in their current homes as long as possible; the numbers rise to 95% for age 75+. While respondents recognized that assistance caring for themselves may be needed in the future, 82% wished to receive the care in their current home. Social and behavioral gerontology supports these findings. For example, Rowles (1987, 1993) and Rubinstein (1989, 1990) focused on aging in place and documented how people make sense of home in late life, and show unexpected creativity in fashioning solutions to remaining in one's place with diminished physical and cognitive abilities. Their work also confirms older adults' abiding attachments to their long-standing homes which serve to counter early stereotypes about the disengagement of older adults from people and place in late life.

Yet major gaps in our knowledge about downsizing remain. What do older adults consider when approaching when and how to downsize, what is the nature of the experience when selecting the objects and possessions to retain or discard for their new home? Against what yardstick do they assess their fit in their life, current home and give value to various possessions to support a start in a new place? How do older adults balance the challenges of remaining vital and engaged while also changing to new locales and social settings? In short, what is the character of this critical life course transition from the point of view of the elderly? A more meaning-centered approach, building from older adults' own personal experiences, is needed to illuminate the phenomenon of downsizing in order to identify and describe the contours of concerns by older adults undergoing this major late life transition.

To date, the research has commonly understood downsizing to be a mostly practical affair: items are sorted through and then dispatched to their designated end. Further, downsizing research has tended to focus narrowly on the special cherished objects and treasures that one cannot leave home without. Yet, downsizing in late life makes evident the meanings

embedded in the people, places, activities and events associated with a home that has been desired and found, lived in, and sometimes left, in pursuit of a place that fits them better. Specifically, in this paper, we examine the stories of downsizing told by those who have undertaken this task. Stories of downsizing provide a way to discern the salience of people, activities and events, and also the objects and possessions that are part of moving to a smaller place. Stories provide a heuristic or an entry-point into meanings that may be deeply linked to life-long cultural processes of development and change (Bruner, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2000). Listening to the stories told by older adults immersed in moves from larger to now more desired compact homes can be revealing yet also seemingly irksome because the stories fix on mundane daily details and commonsensical aphorisms. The stories address, for example, “what to do with all those encyclopedias and records” and, we “just did what had to be done.” Yet we argue these stories ably speak to vistas of later life struggle and creativity still only partly glimpsed by scholars and family. While such life passages routinely occur in every community among older persons, we lack an adequate understanding of these complex personal experiences and practices, and the cultural fabric channeling this transition.

## Methods

Findings are described from a study of older adults’ household downsizing. Participants were recruited in southeastern Michigan using newspaper and radio ads, talks at local health and social events, fliers at community centers, and word-of-mouth. Volunteers, age 65 and older, were invited who had downsized (defined as moving to smaller quarters and reducing possessions) in the past 12 months. Volunteers from 40 households (the unit of analysis) met the criteria. Interviews lasting two hours were conducted in their home; 36 were individual interviews and 4 households included married couples where both were interviewed together.

## Participants

The sample provided a range of older adults and conditions. The average age of the women (n=35) and the men (n=11) was 73 and 75, respectively. Most had several years of education beyond high school. Seventy-percent of the men were White, and 51% of the women were African American. Marital status was as expected: 18 were widowed, 9 were divorced, 9 were married (this included the couples), and 4 were never married. A generally healthy sample, 73% rated their health as good or better, and reported two health conditions on average such as diabetes, hypertension, and arthritis. The adequacy of their income in the past year was described by 58% as “just enough to get by,” by 10% as “not sufficient,” and by 32% as “more than sufficient.” The couples were somewhat better off overall. The relative scope and demands of downsizing itself varied. On average, participants had lived in their prior homes for 20 years and in their new downsized homes for 12 months (range: 2 to 49). The size of the downsized home averaged 857 square feet, ranging from an apartment rental of 396 square feet to a single-family owned home of 2,100 square feet.

## Learning about the Stories of Downsizing

At the start of every interview we invited respondents to share, in their own words, the story of their downsizing. The story question was asked first in order to minimize implicitly directing them to address certain issues or ways of framing the experience. Interviewers asked: “Tell me the story of your move; whatever comes to your mind about what happened along the way. Start the story where you like and take as much time as you need” (Luborsky, 1993). We then listened as they told the story of their downsizing, addressing topics, issues, and preferences for how to construct and narrate the meaningful story of what constituted

downsizing in their life. After they finished, the interview continued with more directed questions to explore how they accomplished the tasks of downsizing.

### Approach to Data Analysis

Given the fundamental gap in basic knowledge of how older adults understand, conduct, and experience household downsizing we used ethnographic content and thematic methods (Luborsky, 1994). Briefly, the authors separately read each story, and then met to discuss impressions, emergent ideas, and preliminary categories that captured the emergent topics. Then, in successive rounds of independent reading by team members, in a discovery mode we aimed to develop appreciation of elements of the stories as directly expressed in the older person's own words. Then, we formulated a preliminary set of thematic categories and illustrative examples, and returned to apply these to several stories, met to discuss results, identify refinements needed to code categories, then conducted coding of the entire corpus. We regard the talk in the stories themselves as the direct reports on what are the personal and social concerns, issues, dilemmas, and resolutions in the experience of downsizing over time and how older adults assess their homes for fit as they age. In selecting possessions to keep, and furnishing, modifying, and personalizing their new smaller environments, they "make themselves at home."

### Findings

Analysis of these 40 stories of downsizing clearly reveals that downsizing is more than a simple, albeit lengthy, task of cataloguing, saving and discarding of objects. Rather, downsizing evokes and unsettles a powerful sense of place experience; there are places in multiple timelines as downsizing is a major transition that deeply engages multiple streams of personal, family, social and cultural life. In this analysis we identified the diverse arenas of experience, issues, and actions that comprise what it is these adults regard as the doing of downsizing. One compelling dimension, expressed by participant's use of the phrase, *it's time* is examined here in depth because it both infuses and cross-cuts the others, and is little recognized in research. In this article the phrase, its time, refers strictly to the dimension as participants conceptualize and use it, and not its general English language usage. It is important to note that the narratives are as varied as the individuals telling them, the lives they lived leading up to this moment, and the particular conditions, opportunities, and constraints they faced in downsizing. Thus, we identify and describe below the descriptions of time and articulate how time is connected to place and making sense of place, through the objects' connections to the person and to time. These patterns are discovered in the analysis of the downsizing phenomena as it is narratively constructed.

### It's Time

The places-in-time in which one undertakes downsizing is woven through many of the stories. We argue this is a location, perhaps the foundational engagement appraised, managed, and evaluated by adults as they refashion a new physical place to inhabit. Clearly, the ostensible stuff of a downsizing account is talk about disposing possessions and transitioning to a smaller home. Yet, while these elements are the topics of the talk they do not additively convey or allow us to answer the question: what do speakers do with them in the stories? The narratives are not just a listing of one's personal estate of dishes, books, dining sets, garden trowels, and clothing (kept or not), and of the real estate the speakers talk about and move between. Rather, the terrain of issues in these downsizing narratives is one of grappling with connections to enduring streams of life engagement in sets of social relationships, identities, and experiences.

This attention to the ways it's time in downsizing is consonant with the gerontological construct of on-time and off-time life course transitions (Becker, 1999; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Neugarten, 1968). Thus, for example, findings here show downsizing is not merely an individual decision in a vacuum divorced from familial considerations, but is oftentimes motivated and propelled by moral persuasion, when downsizing is cast not merely as a way to ease household chores that have become more difficult with age, but rather as a moral activity, supported by social pressure from family and friends who cast downsizing as an obligation to strengthen and contribute to the well-being of the entire family by bringing the family together, sometimes metaphorically but often geographically as well.

Then, after we had been there almost three years, my husband had a stroke and he was ill from December to April, when he died. My son, the one that lives in Birmingham [MI], close by, of course he was at the funeral, and he says, "Mom, I really want you close." He says because he'd be the one to look out for me... I had to, I didn't have a choice. It was because my children wanted me to, you know? They wanted me to move. Then I was coming here, I had already put a deposit on this place... And, I really wanted to be back in Michigan though, you know I was born and raised here... (Wendy, 85 year old widow, Caucasian)

Why I moved? My children asked me to. Well I lived alone in Florida for several years and I missed my children and when they said I should come, I came and I used to come sometimes in the summertime to be with them for a few weeks. But this is better. (Abbey, widow, aged 80, Caucasian)

Notions of it's time are pervasive in how downsizing is comprehended by participants; it conveys the multiplex locations in life that are grappled with by the women in these two downsizing stories. Here, downsizing emerges as complexly determined and enacted. Components of engagement in creative activities include severing some connections (these changes may be socially normative and expected, or a sense of loss), refashioning other connections in a way that enables them to extend prior roles in a different form and discovering new activities. Both of the women above also felt pressure from their children to relocate closer and assume a larger role in the daily goings on of the grandchildren. All other dimensions of the move and associated decisions about household possessions were of distant secondary importance.

These downsizing stories are also redolent with a variety of subsidiary forms of temporalities. Further, the many ways of reckoning time occur in a rich interplay. Downsizing temporalities emerge in the guise of family development over time, historical eras and continuing changes, physical bodies in the past, present, and anticipated futures, as well as in the unfolding personal life biography of hopes, aspirations, and struggles in different settings. These temporalities are described and illustrated next, and summarized in Table 1.

The significance of these varieties of temporality enumerated by older adults can be seen in what is being done with them, that is, how these temporalities are used by and inform the adults downsizing story. The temporalities condense around narrators grappling with believing they are at a place in time where it's time to downsize their household. By that we mean these aspects of temporality are not played out always in a whole stream but emerge and submerge in bits and pieces. Our analysis suggests the speakers' stories evoke the following eight realms of time: lifespan of physical bodies; cultural life course stages; family time; couple time; historical political times; built environment; community time; and eras in downsizing itself. Experienced as *places* inhabited, these temporalities are exposed as these older adults shared what were their paramount considerations, how they weighed

various factors, and ultimately how they made judgments about the benefits despite numerous and often conflicting uncertainties.

### Refashioning a Place in Time: Locations of Downsizing in Older Persons' Stories

**Now this is too much for me - Body time**—Stories of downsizing attended to their own and others' bodily ills and dying and concern about failing to act in time (moving, and obtaining assistance with care) to fend off preventable declines and struggles. Diminishing health was a widely shared concern that could undesirably push their lives off-track. By being attentive to *body time* this unwelcome development could be forestalled. One elderly single woman managed a large home and garden despite severe arthritis. Her story amplifies how body time emerged and prompted her to downsize. Her story detailed how she managed--despite losing function well into her 80s--the flights of stairs to the second floor, cleaning and maintaining her home and gardens herself. Then one day, her body abruptly reminded her it was not perpetual and she best plan now:

I went off with my cane, and I went to lean over to take out a big tall prickly weed, and I was trying to pull it out. Instead, it pulled me down and I fell down on the ground. So I had two knee replacements and I can't kneel to get up. And so I had a hard time scooting on my butt along the ground so I got to the stairway. And then I pushed myself up on the first step, and then tried to bring my legs up a little bit. I can't bend them too well. So then I got up to the next step and I managed to get up, finally. And I thought, you know, this is too much. (Joyce, widow, age 85, Caucasian)

**Couple's body time**—A similar sentiment was shared by several married couples. Referred to as *couple's body time*, it emerges when the couple recognized the future was approaching when their bodies would be too infirm to manage independently in their home. One wife in particular conveyed it this way: "We really should have a different living arrangement for both of us, having him had one stroke and him not wanting to go in the basement as much anymore and going up stairs for the laundry and so forth." (Patricia, age 67, Caucasian) Another couple confronted it:

We started thinking about moving, we retired in Tennessee into somewhat of a retirement community with a golf course. ....Over the years that village grew to be now it's over 6000 people and it has three golf courses, it has a brand-new Wellness Center. It's a very wonderful lifestyle. However, we started to get old. (Christine and Bill, age late 70's, Caucasian)

They talked of inhabiting bodies lived-in through time and of a growing sense of limits and nearing physical needs. In fact, they felt this already, and acknowledged getting old. Wishing to be well enough to take charge of the choices and timing of their next move, they began plans to downsize. Thus, the recognition of getting old triggered the downsizing move. In another instance, and reflecting on his wife's diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS) and the mobility problems it was causing, one husband spoke at length of friends they knew and how those friends dealt with their failing health. He remarked:

Over the years, they either moved back closer to children or they died or got ill and so on. So a couple of years ago with Christine's MS, she thought we were too far from the children, because if anything happened to us, it would be really inconvenient, because it's over 500 miles from Michigan. (Bill and Christine, ages 77 and 80, Caucasian)

The resilience of the body over time, and more often recognition of its increasing frailty was recognized by individuals and couples. Knowing that their bodies had some time, but not



unlimited time, they made the decision to downsize. Their stories reveal their exercise of agency in the face of diminished time.

**At this stage in my life - Cultural life course stage**—The location along the culturally defined life course, or where they were at as on the social timeline of life featured prominently. The stories evoked this through discussions of life stage activities which they were either finished with, or were no longer appropriate in connection with their life stage or at this time in my life. One woman saw herself as having changed and gotten older and was quite comfortable with moving on. Now in retirement, she saw her place in later life as a positive time and an opportunity of contribution to others instead of a loss of any kind.

I went through my wardrobe and I started going (through all) the different clothes, some of them were too young or whatever, because in all, at the senior age, all my clothes and stuff I took them to the rescue mission in the shelter and places like that. I had some suits and things I used to wear for church and stuff and a lot of high heels that I can no longer wear. You give those to the women's working closet, and I did. I got rid of all my stuff I didn't want. (Dionne, age 63, widow, African-American)

One's sense of place on what is a finite life course was an important temporality in all of the stories, but when an individual within a couple differed on this time-line, there was potential for strain. When dyssynchronous couples downsized, the timing was usually dictated by the individual who was further along in time and at least one member of the couple perceived a cost:

I think I aged a lot through it all and I think it was very, very stressful on our marriage but I knew that if we didn't do it now, once he made his mind up, like I said, the window of opportunity may be closed, so we had to go forward. I wish we would have done it earlier but he wouldn't do it. (Carol, age 71, married, Caucasian)

**Hearth and home - Family time**—Abundantly threaded through downsizing stories were placements of downsizing in the realm of an (idealized) enduring spirit of *our* family with children, siblings, or relatives. We learned of children's hopes for parents to downsize and relocate nearby to increase much valued *family time*. For the most part this desire for increased time together brought with it a welcomed strengthening of ties. Being closer to family was a common impetus for their moves. Wendy, described earlier, who moved after her husband had a stroke and died, certainly wanted to be closer to her son, but she wanted to make his life easier too because he would look after her:

So, I thought about it, that was April, and I thought about it, and then he called me one day and he said, "I think I found a place for you to live, would you like to fly up and take a look at it?" So we came here, to the American House [senior living facility] and we put an application in...it was available, and that was in July. (widow, age 85, Caucasian)

Concessions are made however. The move was made quickly and there was pressure to make decisions about what could be kept and what had to be left behind. She described the fast pace of her move and the choices she had to make, and some regrets:

Hmm, he (her son) took, he had this huge house with no furniture in it to speak of so he took a lot. He took the guest bedroom furniture, and he took...I don't know it all, I can't even remember. And then several of my friends came and I gave them things. In that week in between, I had a garage sale. Oh you can't imagine the rush.

This story and those of others contained elements of loss, with the downsizing not going how they had wanted, and how that resulted not only in the loss of certain things, but also the loss of meaningful relationships. Sheira, an 86 year old widow, explained:

It was a big adjustment. I was used to having my car and I gave my car to my granddaughter because I thought they don't need an old white-haired lady who doesn't know where she's going driving around the streets. So anyway I gave up my car. So – but that was really probably the biggest adjustment, and then too, my church. I miss my church. I had very few friends left; most of my close friends have passed. So I only had a few and you know we are all aging and it wasn't like it was, but nothing is as permanent as change.

Family relationships were strained when family time dictated the elderly person's downsizing and forfeiting accustomed places in the community's fabric.

But most often, a longstanding family home was not easily left. In the situations where people had lived the majority if not all of their life in the family home, they felt they were the caretaker of the family's history and family memories, and in one instance, the steward of the family home itself. This made it a difficult house to leave. The sense of responsibility to the family left older adults in this circumstance *frozen* in their decision-making. Carolyn, a 67 year old divorcee, African-American, tells the story of how as the last surviving member of her family, the move was difficult because she was leaving the place her family had made a home in, a place she had been living in for nearly 60 years:

My sister was a diabetic, my mother was just aged. I was the one of the trio who was still working and moving around and going to school and all that... This was the family home, we had been in it for 60 years... You know, it can really paralyze you. I have friends who are my age and they are in the same situation, which is to say, their parents have passed and they're in the house and the house is way too big for them, they're like me... So the rest of the house, you don't use and they just have not been able to cut the umbilical cord. ... But all that, as I say, has made me realize that that emotional thing is one of the strongest deterrents to just really moving. You know, leaving the family property. But really, separating myself from the family property was a real traumatic experience.

A contrasting situation described by Nadine, a 62 year old, single, African-American woman occurred as she decided to leave her own home to relatives who had lived with her, off and on, over many years. There she cared for nephews, nieces and grandkids but now decided the best thing for her was to start over on her own:

It got to be the time when it started getting better and better; after my mom passed I decided that I wanted to be mostly on my own. So I decided to start looking for a place of my own that I would have peace of mind and then when the grandkids and stuff started growing up, you know how teenagers are, music, up and down the steps so I said I'm tired, I want my own so I decided to move.

In this instance, leaving when she no longer felt she had a place or comfort there offered her a new start.

**Couple time**—Married couples were further attentive to conjoint *couple time* and disjunctions there. In some instances it was the personal body times that were out of sync within a couple, where one spouse was robust and energetic while the other battled an acute health event or longstanding chronic health problems. The downsizing process was patterned by these temporalities. For example, the urgency of downsizing was felt more strongly by the individual who felt their time was most foreshortened. Mapped onto places in the household were other more subtle elements of being off-time. A wife in another



couple described being “done” and past the era for formal entertaining and therefore no longer wanted dining room furnishings and fine china. She was not even sure she still needed a home that had a dining room. Not so her husband who was distressed by her readiness to withdraw; the dissonance in couple time caused arguments in both small and larger ways:

Wife: I said I was not going to keep a dining room, I am getting to the point where I am beyond this...I am done with this formal entertaining and he was very upset that we were going to be done formal entertaining, very upset. I could not believe he was that attached to that. I guess it was like sitting at the end of the table and being king of the table or something. (Patricia, Sam, ages respectively 67, 71, Caucasian).

Discussions about the relatively less significant small objects--china and furniture--were redolent with deeper issues about life trajectories and readiness to relinquish socially normative roles and assume others. Not all couples had irreconcilable couple time however. Georgina and James, an African-American couple (aged 69 and 74 respectively) were demonstrably comfortable with the downsizing experience they had. Their downsizing story contained no explicit statements about wider life concerns; their downsizing appeared taken-for-granted and no situating it or explanation appeared to be needed. The change was unproblematic, they decided about possessions, moving out, and moving in with ease. This downsizing story is noteworthy as a counter-example where downsizing is not loss and conflict, but rather an opportunity for investment, re-generation and refashioning of life in a pleasurable way:

But like I said we're, we're still trying to fit it (possessions) in. And we were rejoicing with every improvement. Whether we get rid of — no, I don't think we will—get rid of our love seat. [laughs] I don't think we will...But we just trying to fit in, we just trying to fit in. But in the meantime we are comfortable, we are comfortable, very!

***These changing times - Historical time***—The place of downsizing locates them in increasingly explicit sense of inhabiting a particular (not universal) historical period. For example, “these changing times” was evoked in the stories in the form of discussion of social, technological, political fashions today occurring at a pace or in a way distinct from their own sense of belonging in a now aged birth cohort. Stories in this realm were brief and varied. For example, they explored how the calamitous housing market in these “crazy times” would “knock them off course” in terms of selling and buying a home. A few were aware of this financial “optimal timing” but also the optimal factors to consider when selecting where to buy their new home. Sam, Patricia’s husband, a 71 year old Caucasian: “We wanted to move into an area that had a good school system, that if we decided in the future that we wanted to move, we would not be hampered by a poor school system.” Poignantly, Martha explained her downsizing story as being that of an older woman who had sold real estate earlier in her career. She highlighted this aspect, referring adamantly to “this point in (historical) time” and how it affected her downsizing plans:

So ...the real estate market at that time was going through another little recession, I realized I didn't want to spend so much time worrying about how I was going to get money and that I should just downsize where I was, down cost there's nothing wrong with the size, the size was fine. It was down size or down cost so I really “down costed” to a place about a third the cost of where I was living because I thought as long as I was going to make this move, it had to be significant enough to make a difference and my not having to worry about money. (72 year old divorced Caucasian)

**Community time**—Downsizing is further placed in the evolving composition and character of local communities. Sometimes this is voiced in terms of opinions by peers and community members in judgment about other people’s pathways into downsizing. In the earlier case of the couple with the wife Christine, who had MS, her husband Bill anchors discussion in the timeline of the community that has observed others’ relocations as well as their own developmental timeline. For instance their place in the evolving community lifecycle is referenced by Bill when he describes the retirement community where they used to live. The factor that patterned their downsizing decision was discussed earlier when discussing their entry into the retirement community where they now live:

And we were the youngest at that time, we were the young group. There were people in our pioneer group that were older than us so over the years, they either moved back closer to children or they died or got ill and so on. So a couple of years ago with Christine’s MS, she thought we were too far from the children...

Community judgments also overlapped with historical time and participants described how the opinions of others could persuade, in both directions, sometimes pushing them to downsize “before time ran out” and at other times discouraging them from downsizing until the times (historical time) got better. Patricia described the advice that she received from several friends and family about trying to sell her home and downsize:

That’s what our friends kept saying and our relatives, “You are selling your house in this economy in Michigan? You’re crazy. You’re a lunatic! You are going to lose money.” Always negativity. All I could say was, the window of opportunity is open right now. I don’t know what our health is going to be 2 years, 5 years, 10 years, we’ve got to move before something happens to either one of us...we think we did okay. Still, we needed that money from our other house.

It was difficult to ignore the social pressure and notion that one was resisting a wider community view of the “best time” to sell and move.

**Time to leave or change - Built physical environment**—The fact that the buildings of the home environment did not change to keep up with the older adult’s needs (and perhaps even decaying) meant it became inhospitable to some older adults over time. Our study participants spoke of the growing burden and cost of repairs and upkeep on aged buildings, analogous to the owners’ own aging bodies. There were many concerns similar to Carolyn’s. After Carolyn’s elderly mother passed away, but while still caring for a disabled sister in the home she had shared with her family for many years, she explained: “Over the course of time I realized that we needed to get out of the family house because the bedrooms and the bathroom was upstairs and the stairs was wearing both myself and my sister out.” (divorcee, age 67, African-American). Elderly bodies did not always continue to fit the homes they found themselves in. Body time and the built physical environment often overlapped in the downsizing stories, and conspired to force some downsizing moves. Patricia and Sam, described earlier, depicted the situation: “We really should have a different living arrangement for both of us, having him had one stroke and him not wanting to go in the basement as much anymore and going up stairs for the laundry and so forth.” Sometimes the shortfalls in the home environment could be put off into the future through simple interventions like installing a hand rail to the second floor, or a special bathtub bench to assist in bathing and to prevent a fall. However, eventually the fixes were insufficient and body time overwhelmed the ability of the place to support the aging person. Eventually it became time to move and downsize.

**Stages in the downsizing time**—All the perceived places in time identified so far have been *external* to the actual downsizing process. These locations index timelines in settings

from personal, to social, historical, and the built environment. The final place specified as an experiential locus of it's time is situated along the pathway of actually doing the downsizing, which included explicit stages, breaks and transitions. That is, the downsizing stories reveal that the process is not a homogenous continuum, or a random ordering by which people simply relocate and downsize possessions. Rather, participants state a strong belief in a *proper* order to things, voiced in terms of not being ready to break down the arrangement of things in the house, give away an heirloom, or readiness to relocate, or not yet ready to even rearrange a den. We note this ordering is highly personalized rather than rigidly formulaic and is not the result of informal or formal social regulation. This kind of *behavioral narrative* has been described elsewhere, for example, in terms of the sequence of setting-specific activities that recent retirees follow to accomplish the transition from work to retirement (Luborsky, 1995). For example, Georgina a 69 year old African American woman, referred to undertaking her downsize in stages and taking breaks in between. "(I have a curtain) that covers one bedroom wall to hide stacks of unpacked boxes to take care of it for the time being." She explains the stages in downsizing as a way to avoid having to tackle all the work of downsizing at once. She took breaks of several weeks and even a month at a time and modified the pace of her downsizing to minimize the disruption to her current living space. This was not unusual, especially for those who undertook the task mostly on their own. Another woman took more than a year to complete her downsizing move, and when she talked about her new home which was still full of unpacked boxes she said: "I've been here all this time. I had a little break during the summer ... So it's like that break in time... so now I feel like I can get back into it..." (Dionne, age 63, African-American widow) Thus, downsizing was hardly a single event that began once and ended shortly after the relocation. Rather downsizing was conceptualized as occurring in multiple places including the pre- and post-move home but also sometimes storage facilities and the basements and attics of family members. The time taken for downsizing was also widely divergent, from less than three weeks to over two years. In the downsizing story of an elderly man who took two years to downsize all of his accumulated material possessions, we observe one of his desires in downsizing which was to revisit his possessions. He took great care in considering each item in his possession and its disposition, contemplating and revisiting the places in his life each possession evoked. He was grandly pleased to announce he downsized "in my own time."

In summary, the places in time we characterize in this analysis serve the goal of illuminating the diverse realms within which downsizing is conceptualized, conducted, and evaluated. The time necessary to undertake a move, the timing of when the downsize is right given one's body time and time along the life course may or may not match the expectations and suggestions of others. Yet, all of these dimensions of time are noticed and evaluated and compared to older adults' ideals, wishes, and standards that in turn shape the phenomenological level of lived experiences and focused work enacted by a downsizing move. In closing we offer a brief case to further illustrate these findings.

### Martha's Downsizing Story

Martha, a 72 year old divorced Caucasian woman is a retired real estate agent. She undertook two downsizing moves. She presents downsizing in terms of multiple places, her location in the cultural life course, march of historical cohorts, the national economic cycle, technology, a neighborhood's lifespan, cherished personal collections, and family history. She richly invents places by creatively making and inhabiting new physical and social spaces in later life. She begins, first, at the age of 61, when she downsized from a large luxury condominium into a small house "that was half the size." Her reasons were primarily financial, saying "at that time" she was "of an age" where she didn't want to work as much so she needed a more affordable home in a smaller income. She was also looking for a

neighborhood that was more diverse than the neighborhoods she had lived in all her life, describing those as "pretty conservative" and "proper." She described this first downsized house as her "cozy home" which came at a very good time in her life. Still, while it was apparently a charming home with a "beautifully landscaped yard," the property was large, demanding, and expensive to maintain. With her work decreasing significantly as a result of the downturn in the economy, Martha downsized a second time into a small apartment in "a completely different neighborhood way across town." The second move was financially difficult since the weak housing market forced her to sell "at a big loss." Martha felt badly for her neighbors since she knew this would affect the home prices of her neighbors. Yet the greatest dilemma posed by her moves was downsizing her most cherished possession of all--the thousands of books she had acquired over the years. Before she was married, Martha had been an English teacher. The first downsize forced her first "emotional decision." After deliberating for months, Martha donated hundreds of books to her local library.

In her second downsize she had to reduce the volume of her possessions even further, and parted with nearly all of her remaining books. Martha's story about "her treasures [books]" was emotional: she related numerous instances of memorable events that were transpiring at this stage in her life. She talked about her marriage and her children and then reflected on how moving into that stage of life meant the end of her much loved teaching career. Toward the end of her downsizing story, as she reflected on the variety of transitions in her life as a wife, a mother and now a divorced older adult living alone, Martha wondered aloud whether the reason giving away her books was so difficult was because the books "represented a part of me that I didn't pursue." There was a sense of some losses and regrets in Martha's story, but Martha was also thrilled to have found her new home where she had been for nearly a year. She saw her family often, had an expanding group of new friends, and was actively engaged in customizing her space to fit her life. Martha had also started walking outside for exercise, and recently became a member of the library in her new neighborhood. She also enrolled in a class at the local library to learn how to use a new gift from her grandson, an iPod, to listen to downloaded books.

Martha's downsizing story opens up an appreciation for the strong pull of physical spaces and objectives but also a strong push to leave-take when circumstances require it. As this story shows, the salience of place was inseparable from places in time. Economic times shaped the timing of her move, but her sense of "being of a certain age" also shows how her decisions about downsizing occurred against the timeline of her own life, which was moving along and if she was going to change things, it needed to be now. The kind of place she downsized into was also connected to her most valued possession, books. Books contributed to her feeling *in place* and without them she felt she had lost something of herself. The downsize story reminds us that through objects, we are reminded of times in our lives, and personal paths taken across our lives, or not. Martha's case also suggests the non-linearity of downsizing and possibility of sequential moves. While life may be moving forward in time, Martha's downsizing story reflects the interrelated dimensions of historical time, economic time, and personal time. Finally, while downsizing includes losses and disruptions to daily habituated surroundings, things, habits, and patterns, downsizing can also open up the consideration of place. For Martha, downsizing must be understood within the context of her experience and individual biography, her place in the succession of generations through education, the developing community, and history.

## Discussion

This article identified and described multiple components of ideas about place. Here, adults' downsizing experiences focused on a robust conceptualization of places-in-time that powerfully infused and shaped the form of this unique later life transition. We argue that

these components remains inadequately described in current research on housing transitions and place-making in later life. While the study findings have limits related to the small sample of 40 older adult households in southeastern Michigan and the challenges posed by the economic and national housing market problems, this study offers insights into the process of downsizing and ways in which downsizing stories are shaped by local conditions. The study helps document shared cultural notions of these places in time. The findings generalize most directly to those adults who have been able to accumulate objects and things over a lifetime and now face scaling these down alongside the residential move. Insights gleaned from less affluent older adults in the study are nonetheless revelatory to the extent that they illuminate features of the downsizing process that older persons find meaningful as they relocate from one place they call home to another.

Several contributions are offered from the study. First, the analyses of downsizing stories advance emerging insights from Ekerdt et al. (2004) and Ekerdt and Sergeant (2006) and extends the critique: it is not the things and the keeping of things that are paramount in changing one's place, and one's home, but rather **the myriad fabric** they instantiate and index -- meaningful personal, lifetime, historical, and family time. Thus, downsizing is much more than a problem of possession management. These findings are interpreted to identify how the experiences and conduct of downsizing reveal new nuances in the conceptualization and conduct of refashioning the place they inhabit to encompass the rich streams of their past-present-future. Thus, accumulated material objects and property including the home itself are lived with, not only lived in. While it must be acknowledged that older adults become habituated to their belongings (Csikzentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), and some possessions reach the status of cherished possessions deserving of a lasting legacy, the foundational values and cultural and normative ideals that shape downsizing decisions are the bedrock against which possession management needs to be compared.

Second, and confirming Ekerdt et al. (2004) and Ekerdt and Sergeant (2006), our data suggest the presence of more than one stage, way, or type of downsizing. The stories examined show how this is rarely a one-of or one-time episode, but more often an iterative sometimes protracted process infused with multiple fits and starts. We had originally conceived of downsizing as a process that would begin when the move seemed likely and conclude once people settled into their new place. In contrast, study data show how downsizing possessions often starts months before the move, and unfolds in a series of steps, dependent on the local conditions and situations of the older adults themselves. One's place in the life course colored these episodes. Some households were making their second post-retirement move (e.g. as widows, widowers) and characteristically to yet smaller dwellings than first-time downsizers. Thus, downsizing from one place to a new place can be repeated, sometimes several times, which should be expected if there is a developmental pattern to relocation and migration in later life (Litwak & Longino 1987).

Third, data showed how family is variously a resource and impediment in downsizing. While related research as well as these data show how family members assist with the practical aspects of downsizing moves and often become the beneficiaries of possessions that the older family member cast off, families as a social unit were critical in the determination of whether and how an older adult even downsized at all.

Finally, we return to the idea of time and attention to the ways it's time as a place inhabited by participants operated in the narrative structure of stories of downsizing households in later life. We suggest that it's time is to some degree consonant with the gerontological construct of "on-time" and "off-time" life course transitions (Becker, 1999; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Neugarten, 1968). Yet, in others ways it is contentious. Adults bring



deeply socialized cultural expectations about an orderly and timely regularity for life events -- a certain schedule including marriage, children, retirement and perhaps downsizing. Early gerontological research by Neugarten showed that adults share expectations about ages for significant social and personal milestones, and Neugarten and Hagestad (1976) showed family or work, were central concerns for being off time and at odds with social clock (Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984). One contribution of these stories is to show that while these expectations reflect cultural age norms, they may be less anchored in the societal normative structure and more emergent and individualized in each person's own sense of their life biography.

Interestingly, the notion of it's time also harkens to, but contrasts with the contemporary behavioral health interventionists' construct of individual readiness for change in the formal stages of change model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983). Put simply, people do not operate on such a one-dimensional mechanical timeline. The notion of it's time affirms those critiques of the stages of change model which point out its overly individualistic and decontextualized psychological focus. Further, findings from our study show that downsizing is not merely an individual decision stripped of familial considerations, but is often propelled by moral persuasion, when downsizing is cast by the downsizer's family as a moral obligation to enhance the overall well-being of the entire family..

In conclusion, these findings illustrate features that are not adequately described by other studies focusing on aging in place, and relocations to more supportive living environments due to significant physical declines. Study data show that downsizing is part of a life-long normative process of change and adjustment as older adults take on new roles in their new places, some expected and others not. Our data show how people come and go through many social and physical intersections in their lives, as do objects and possessions, and often in a non-linear fashion. At the same time the findings on socially expectable and normative life changes provide a useful antidote to gerontological emphases more attuned to examining how people cope with the traumatic events of illness, disease, loss and death. In talking about their dishes, tools, and books, the downsizing stories showed us a cascading torrent of thoughtful engagements with large and small value dilemmas, mixed loyalties to self, family, community and society, and concerns for personal legacy and honoring of the values of other family members.

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**Table 1****“It’s Time” – Realms, Reasons and Temporalities of Downsizing**

<b>Categories (quotes in italics)</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Now this is too much for me, At our age</i> ; Failing body over time	Failing physical body, portending actual or possible future health events that impact downsizing; the ‘body’ unit conceptualized is one’s own, or spouse’s, or both with implications for the couple
<i>At this stage in my life</i> ; Cultural life course stage	Culturally defined normative life course stages (e.g., childhood-adulthood-retirement) dictate and guide downsizing decisions
<i>Hearth and home, family togetherness</i> ; Family time	Enduring family “hearth and home” as a place in spirit kept alive through time; but, also geographical closeness to provide tangible (or reciprocal aid) to family
<i>I’m done with that, but I guess he isn’t</i> ; Couple time	Married couple’s life cycle as a team (marriage, family, shared decisions, including downsizing); consenting or dissenting about readiness to downsize
<i>These changing times, at this point in time</i> ; Historical time	Societal-level historical, political and economic conditions and changes (e.g. formerly taken-for-granted national economy now stymies home sales needed to downsize)
<i>This is the worst time to sell</i> ; Local community time	Neighbors or local family judgments about downsizing decisions reflect cultural ideals, values and expectations (e.g. selling home for a loss in bad economic conditions; or not just “throw away possessions” with value)
<i>Time to leave or change</i> ; The physical built environment	Existing environment no longer accommodating as older person has less physical ability, propelling downsizing; or, decaying state of building / neighborhood requires repair
<i>Ready for that step, Not yet</i> ; Stages in the downsizing process	Explicit stages, eras, readiness, and breaks in the steps and stages of doing the downsizing