Oral presentations

268

A MIXED METHOD INVESTIGATION OF OLDER PEOPLE’S PERCEPTION OF THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD, ITS USER-FRIENDLINESS AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH STRESS AND COGNITION

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Background: Age- and dementia-friendly initiatives have promoted the creation of supportive environments for older people’s physical and mental health. The neighbourhood can play an important role in promoting cognitive health and wellbeing in ageing; we conducted two studies to explore older people’s perceptions of environmental enablers/stressors in their neighbourhood, and their links with measures of cognition.

Methods: In Study 1, walking interviews and focus groups were conducted with 25 individuals aged 60+ to define what types of outdoor spaces they prefer to use and the perceived impact on cognitive health.

In Study 2, 162 participants aged 18–80 years old completed a survey investigating associations between neighbourhood characteristics and measures of perception/cognition across different age groups. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data, while factor analysis, correlations, and comparisons by age and level of urbanisation of the place of residence were used for the survey.

Results: Heterogeneity in older people’s choice and use of outdoor spaces emerged in Study 1 based on purpose, familiarity and affect. Easy access to both urban and natural spaces was preferred, as it offered an alternation of mental stimulation and relief from stress. Social ties and lifestyle were important mediators.

In Study 2, higher rates of environmental stressors were found in urban than natural places, and were linked to more attentional failures.

Conclusion: Our findings suggest that older people choose to use different places based on the need for stimulating environments or relaxation. When the environment is very stimulating it can be associated with failure of attention. As opposite, familiarity with the environment can act as buffer for such deficits.