

# “Home Is Where My Couch Is”: The Role of Possessions in the Process of Moving and Adjusting to Continuing Care Retirement Communities

Qualitative Health Research  
2019, Vol. 29(4) 577–588  
© The Author(s) 2018  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/1049732318780350  
journals.sagepub.com/home/qhr  


Ohad Green<sup>1</sup>  and Liat Ayalon<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

We examined the role of possessions in the process of moving and adjusting to continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs). Totally, 59 CCRC residents in 12 CCRCs were interviewed. We categorized three main types of residents: “I want it all,” “I want it that way,” and “I want to break free.” Each type experienced differently the role that objects play in (a) the reasons for moving, (b) choosing a CCRC and a specific apartment, (c) organizing one’s belongings in preparation for relocation, and (d) adjusting to the new apartment. Most residents were attached to their belongings and reported having great difficulty leaving them behind. Our findings suggest that while older adults should be given every possible opportunity to make their own choices about their belongings, it is also necessary to balance between the desire to maintain continuity with their past, and the limited space of a CCRC apartment.

## Keywords

adjustment; possessions; older adults; relocation; change; continuity; qualitative; Israel; middle-east; semi-structured interviews

We collect and accumulate objects for many years—furniture, ornaments, gifts, souvenirs. Some of them are in daily use, keeping alive the moment they became ours. Others hang on walls or sit on shelves, recalling certain moments in our lives. Some are stored away and their only importance is that we own them. When we prepare to move house, all these objects gather around us, reminding us of different chapters in our life story. We place these objects in boxes, hoping to keep our book of life intact by simply unpacking them in our new home. But we often have to give up some of the objects, tearing off certain pages of that book. We have to decide which objects will accompany us and which will stay behind, and this requires thorough consideration.

This process of discarding certain objects during relocation has been titled disbandment (Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, & Bowen, 2004) and even *casser maison*, or “breaking the house” (Roth, Eckert, & Morgan, 2015). These are no casual terms. They indicate the emotional intensity of this separation, and the difficulty of deciding what will be taken along and what must be left behind (Ekerdt et al., 2004). The more objects we possess (Kroger & Adair, 2008), the longer we have kept them, and the smaller the space we are

moving into (Kroust, Moen, Holmes, Oggins, & Bowen, 2002), the harder the decision.

For older adults, this process is particularly difficult. It is longer and more complex because they have probably accumulated numerous objects over the years (Kroger & Adair, 2008). With age, the emotional value and nostalgic significance of the objects grow (Nord, 2013). In addition, many older adults move to smaller apartments (Nord, 2013) and are, therefore, unable to take all their belongings with them. These factors make the process of disbandment difficult for many older adults. Not only do they have to decide what to give up, but also how this should be done: should they give their possessions to charity, offer them to family members, sell them, or simply throw them away? As they relinquish their objects, they will also have to abandon the place that contains them, the object many people become most attached to - their home.

<sup>1</sup>Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

## Corresponding Author:

Ohad Green, Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work,  
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 5290002, Israel.  
Email: ohad.grn@gmail.com

## Place Attachment and Place Dependence

In addition to our attachment to other people and to objects, we also become attached to places. It is a basic human need that has an important part in our well-being (Billig, 2006). Bowlby (1969) found a resemblance between attachment to another person and attachment to a place, as they both have an effect on our thoughts, emotions, and actions.

The first place people tend to become attached to is their home (Billig, 2006). The saying “my home is my castle” represents the deep significance a home has for its residents. The home is our castle because it is a familiar surrounding with familiar people. We have decorated it, shaped it, and adapted it to our needs, and it, therefore, serves as a reflection of ourselves (Ekerdt et al., 2004). Its rooms are filled with our memories. Our home links our past, present, and future.

Older adults are often especially attached to their homes (Wiles et al., 2009). Relocation, therefore, has a deeper significance for them than for younger people. Moving tends to be more complicated, as older adults must adapt to a new physical and social environment (Ayalon & Green, 2013), and not only to the new place. This process of adaptation requires flexibility among all people who move, but it can be more difficult when it occurs at an age at which we tend to cling to the familiar (Atchley, 1989). Moreover, in many cases, moving to a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) is perceived to be one’s final relocation, after the person has lived in the same home for many years. Every corner of the previous home is filled with memories, and many consider the idea of leaving the home and its memories to be inconceivable.

Although people must sometimes leave their familiar and often beloved home and surroundings, their belongings can serve as a link between old and new, familiar and unfamiliar, past and present. Moving our belongings from the old place to the new place can help us connect to the new place and maintain a sense of continuity with what was left behind.

## Material Attachment in Older Age

Objects can be part of our personal or family heritage and part of our identity (Nord, 2013). Many objects we possess evoke memories, whether happy or sad, comforting or upsetting. Objects can serve as aides-memoires, acting as testimony that past moments actually happened. Older adults sometimes attach greater significance to objects, because the many losses they experience with age can undermine their sense of identity (Kroger & Adair, 2008). Objects that serve to remind them of the reality of past events might help them maintain a solid sense of identity.

Individual objects can carry more than one meaning, and might be associated with different periods in a person’s life (Perry, 2015). For example, a university diploma might represent youth, but also evoke memories of young parenthood. Heirloom candlesticks and old jewelry might represent the past for us, as well as standing for future continuity as we pass them on to our children. Thus, by giving up objects, we run the risk of feeling that we are losing ties to our past as well as to what could have been.

## Place and Material Attachment in the Transition to CCRCs

A primary factor that determines the need to give up objects is the difference in size of the previous and future homes. Moving to a similar-sized home enables us to keep many of our objects, but moving to a CCRC usually means having to adapt to smaller living quarters. This type of private facility is primarily intended for older adults who are independent when they enter. In many cases, the CCRC is a living complex where the resident is given a private apartment whose maintenance is the responsibility of the management. The residents are often offered enrichment activities, such as group activities and lectures, as well as medical and social services. In the past few years, a growing number of older adults have been relocating to CCRCs. They move for diverse reasons, including current and potential future health issues, an inability to adjust their current home to their changing needs, or pressure from family members (Krout et al., 2002).

CCRCs differ from one another on many levels, such as the number of residents, the nature and quality of activities, and the number of staff members, common areas, and offered facilities. However, despite the considerable differences between them, they tend to share one characteristic: limited space (Kahana, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Kahana, 2003). Most of the apartments are studios or one-bedroom, able to accommodate a single person (Nord, 2013). Although some CCRCs include larger apartments, the number of such apartments is small, their cost is high, and the majority of single residents do not opt for them. However, even CCRC apartments that are designed for two people are usually smaller than the couple’s previous home. Older adults who move to a CCRC will usually have smaller living spaces than they had before and will have to give up many objects as part of the relocation. Moreover, the CCRC is often located in a different neighborhood or city, which means the person relocating will also have to adjust to a new environment and a different lifestyle. As a result, the objects they are familiar with might become even more important, because everything else will be new.

## The Meaning of Belongings for Older Adults in the Process of Relocation

Previous studies that examined the significance older adults attach to objects as they prepare to relocate have mostly dealt with relocation to non-CCRC apartments or to long-term care facilities. For example, Nord (2013) interviewed older adults who had moved to assisted living facilities. He found that the interviewees generally chose to take three types of belongings with them: memorabilia (such as photos) from significant events, objects that reflected their professional life, and objects (mainly furniture) that they used on a daily basis. These objects provided a link between their past and present and helped them adjust to their new apartment. Ekerdt et al. (2004) found that older adults moving to smaller apartments wanted to take belongings that they had not yet used, including books they had not read and new clothes, as a means to master the future. Perry (2015) interviewed older adults who had moved to various settings and found that only a few had gone through the disbandment process without any stress.

These studies have contributed to our understanding of the meaning of possessions for older adults. However, they do not explore the possible relationship between having to leave behind cherished objects and the process of settling into and decorating the new home. In addition, they focused on older adults moving to non-CCRC locations, and the experience of moving into a new house or apartment might be quite different from the experience of moving to a CCRC. Studies that have examined the relocation of older adults to CCRCs have focused on their adapting to a new routine and social environment (Cutchin, Marshall, & Aldrich, 2010; Sugihara & Evans, 2000; Young Spokane, Shaw, & Krout, 2009) rather than on the role of possessions in the process of moving and adjustment.

## The Present Study

The proposed study was designed to examine the experience of separating from objects in light of the process of transition and adjustment to a CCRC. Given the growing number of older adults who choose to move to CCRCs, this research is of crucial importance. Its findings may help develop methods and interventions to deal with the need to give up objects, and consequently make transitioning and adjusting to the CCRC easier.

The study's theoretical point of departure is Atchley's (1989) continuity theory, which claims that older adults strive to maintain the same lifestyle they are used to—both internally (thoughts and emotions) and externally (activities and physical and social environment). Because they are associated with memory, objects are seen as a means to maintain these two kinds of factors (Lieberman

& Tobin, 1983) and, therefore, are part of our identity. The lives of older adults change drastically with the transition to CCRCs, but holding on to objects of the past, and sometimes even decorating the new apartment and arranging furniture and other objects in the same style as before, may help them maintain continuity where so much that was familiar has vanished. This study builds on our previous qualitative study (Ayalon & Green, 2015), which examined the diverse experiences of older adults transitioning to CCRCs. That study focused on adjustment to the CCRC but did not focus on the role of possessions (Ayalon & Green, 2015).

## Method

This study was approved by the Helsinki Committee of Maccabi Healthcare Services as well as by the ethics committee of Bar Ilan University. Data for this analysis were taken from 59 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2010 and 2014 with older adults in Israel, who had been less than 1 year in a CCRC. The data used for the present study are part of a larger longitudinal qualitative study of older adults and their family members, partially funded by the Israel Science Foundation. Initial recruitment was performed by CCRC employees (typically the social workers) who approached recent CCRC residents and described the study to them. Interested individuals were contacted by the first author who gave further information and invited them to take part in the study. All participants signed an informed consent form. Interviews and preliminary mock interviews were performed either by the first author or by trained research assistants.

When constructing the sample universe, we attempted to reach maximum variations (Patton, 1990) in terms of CCRC residents (e.g., age, gender, and marital status; Table 1) and CCRC characteristics (e.g., geographic location, socioeconomic characteristics, and organization type; Table 2). We concluded the recruitment process when we reached content saturation and no new data in the form of thematic categories emerged from the interviews. Interviews were conducted either in Hebrew (58) or in English (1).

Although most CCRCs offer different kinds of dwellings for different levels of dependency, all the participants in the study were independent and lived in the independent section of their CCRC at the time of the interview. It should be noted that in Israel, as in other countries (Snyder, 2017), prospective CCRC residents must meet the community's health standard and be capable of living independently at the time of their entry to the CCRC. Apartments for less independent residents are reserved for those whose physical status has declined after their move to the CCRC.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

	I Want It All (n = 20)	I Want It That Way (n = 27)	I Want to Break Free (n = 12)	$\chi^2/F$
Age (SD)	81.01 (4.53)	80.33 (4.20)	77.92 (5.55)	1.77
Gender				
% Female	75%	81.5%	100%	3.41
Months in CCRC (SD)	8.25 (3.99)	7.62 (2.84)	7.73 (2.41)	.23
Number of children (SD)	2.95 (1.43)	2.59 (.93)	2.00 (.95)	2.65
Marital status				
Married/live with someone	30%	44%	16.7%	10.27*
Widowed/live alone	70%	56%	83.3%	
Financial status				
Cannot make ends meet		4.2%		5.15
Just enough to get along	12.5%	20.8%	16.7%	
Comfortable	36.4%	75%	83.3%	
Excellent	5.6%			
Years of education (SD)	11.75 (4.21)	12.37 (3.56)	13.58 (1.83)	.98

Note. CCRC = continuing care retirement community.

Interviews followed a funnel approach (Tracy, 2012) starting from broad questions, followed by more detailed ones. Sample questions included descriptive items, such as questions about the process of moving into a CCRC; interpretive items, such as perceived ways that made the household disbandment process easier; and comparative items, such as distinctions between the old and new living spaces. General questions were followed by more specific questions related to the role of possessions in the process of moving and adjusting to the CCRC. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours.

We employed line-by-line thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We selected the major theme of the role of possessions in the transition to the CCRC and identified related themes to create a coherent story line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then reviewed each of the interviews as a whole in an attempt to identify whether there were types of CCRC residents who follow unique response patterns with regard to the particular themes identified.

## Findings

All interviewees reported that they had to leave behind some of their possessions because they moved to smaller apartments. Even those who moved to relatively large two-bedroom apartments said they had been unable to take all their belongings with them. Consequently, we predicted that all interviewees would admit to having had varying degrees of difficulty leaving behind some of their personal belongings. However, analysis of the interviews

revealed that the picture was less straightforward. Most of the older adults we interviewed were very attached to their belongings and to their old home, and reported having great difficulty leaving them behind. However, some of the older adults did not attach any significance to their belongings, and even considered relocating to the CCRC as an opportunity to get rid of these objects, as part of a general sense of “a new beginning.”

This means that the feelings of older adults about having to give up certain objects form a continuum, with extreme attachment on one end and neutrality on the other, and pragmatic realism in between. We categorized three main types of people on this continuum: “I want it all,” “I want it that way,” and “I want to break free.” Each type experienced differently the role that objects play in the four stages of relocation to a CCRC: (a) the reasons for moving, (b) choosing a CCRC and a specific apartment, (c) organizing one’s belongings in preparation for relocation, and (d) adjusting to the new apartment. The “I want it all” residents were extremely attached to their home and surrounding and wanted to take all of their belongings with them. The “I want it that way” residents were attached to their home and surrounding, but adopted a pragmatic approach. The “I want to break free” residents were not attached at all to their belongings and surrounding, were happy to replace old objects with new ones, and generally saw the move as “a new beginning.”

To explore whether there is difference between the three typologies, a series of chi-square and analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses were performed. No difference was found regarding age, gender, months in the CCRC, years of education, number of children, and financial status.

**Table 2.** CCRCs Characteristics.

Name	No. of Interviewees	District	Dwelling	Rooms <sup>a</sup>	Average Age	Monthly Payment(in ILS) <sup>b</sup>	Nursing Department	Ownership	Type
CO	2	South	Town home	210	85	Variable	No	NPO	Non-chain
BY	1	South	Condo	160	82	8,000–10,000	Yes	NPO	Non-chain
NA	4	Center	Condo	140	87	Unavailable	Yes	Private	Chain
TR	4	Center	Condo	60	90	4,000–7,000	Yes	NPO	Non-chain
AD	1	Center	Condo	180	Unavailable	Variable	Yes	Private	Chain
GB	1	Center	Condo	120	85	Average 7,000	Yes	Private	Non-chain
VS	2	Center	Condo	55	87	3,000–4,000	Yes	NPO	Chain
B.I	2	Center	Condo	120	87	7,000–30,000	Yes	NPO	Non-chain
BBI	6	Center	Condo	90	80	5,000–7,000	No	NPO	Chain
BBR	2	Center	Condo	66	85	5,700–10,000	Yes	NPO	Chain
LG	2	North	Condo	80	82	4,600–7,200	Yes	Private	Non-chain
BBI	30	North	Condo	300	84	3,000–7,000	Yes	NPO	Chain

Note. NPO = Non-profit organizations; CCRCs = continuing care retirement communities.

<sup>a</sup>Not including nursing department rooms.

<sup>b</sup>ILS=New Israeli Shekel, Not including initial deposit.

However, the “I want to break free” had the highest rate of living alone residents ( $\chi^2 = 10.27, p < .05$ ; See Table 1).

Table 3 presents the frequencies of each theme and sub-themes among each of the three groups. As for the reason for moving, 75% of the “I want it all” group reported only forced relocation reasons, such as a sudden decline in their health or family pressure to move, compared to only 18% of the “I want it that way” group and 0% of the “I want to break free” group.

As for the reasons for choosing the specific CCRC and specific apartment, 60% of the “I want it all” group reported only emotional reasons (e.g., preferred to stay in their familiar neighborhood; were offered an apartment that was similar to their previous one) compared to only 15% of the “I want it that way” group and 0% of the “I want to break free” group.

As for the disbandment process, 90% of the “I want it all” group described a long, sentimental, and difficult process, with no pragmatic considerations; 10% of this group reported some pragmatic considerations as well. Of the “I want it that way” group, only 26% reported sentimental considerations during the disbandment process, and 30% reported pragmatic considerations. By contrast, all the “I want to break free” residents reported a quick and pragmatic disbandment process. As for difficulties in adjusting to the CCRC and the new apartment, 75% of the “I want it all” group reported a long and difficult adjustment process, or no adjustment at all yet, compared to 37% of the “I want it that way” group and 0% of the “I want to break free” group.

### “I Want It All!”

**Reasons for moving.** Because they were extremely attached to their home and neighborhood, the “I want it all” group

did not relocate voluntarily. Relocation often followed a crisis or resulted from family pressure. Many of these people had been living in the same home for many years, and had had little previous experience with moving. Not only had they accumulated numerous objects, they had never had to experience giving them up. They felt they would sorely miss their old home, which was the largest belonging they were unable to take with them. After relocating, some of them found it difficult to visit their old home, although some went back to pick up additional objects. It also took the members of this group a long time to call their new residence “home”; some were still not able to at the time of the interview. They used different words for the new home: “my room,” “apartment,” or simply the name of the CCRC. The story of Dora illustrates this point. Although she had thought about moving to a CCRC before her husband died, she rejected the idea because her home was considerably more spacious than the CCRC apartment. She remained in her home for several years after her husband’s death, until circumstances forced her to leave:

When my children called and asked, “Mommy, where are you now?,” I couldn’t say “I’m at home.” I always said, “I’m in the ‘apartment’” or even ‘I’m in the cage.’ Yes! The cage! That’s what I felt. You’re leaving a big apartment and you’ve collected things over the years . . . It made me happy. Now if I buy things, where will I put them? [When we visited the CCRC,] I saw an apartment with a kind of sleeping niche. I said, “No, I’m sorry, I won’t move from a large house into a cubbyhole like this. I haven’t sinned or done anything wrong.” . . . I thought it over for four years . . . yes-no, yes-no, until my house was broken into. The burglars got as far as my bed . . . so my sons—I have three sons—said, “Mom, leave the house, sell it, do what you want, but just leave.”

**Table 3.** Main Themes and Frequencies of Subthemes Across the “I Want It All,” “I Want It That Way” and “I Want to Break Free” Groups.

Main Theme	Subtheme	I Want It All (n = 20)	I Want It That Way (n = 27)	I Want to Break Free (n = 12)
A. The reasons for moving to a CCRC	A1. Forced/family pressure	75%	18.5%	None
	A2. Planned	10%	37%	91.7%
	A3. Both	15%	44.5%	8.3%
B. Choosing a CCRC and a apartment	B1. Emotional reasons	60%	14.8%	None
	B2. Practical reasons	10%	66.7%	83.4%
	B3. Both	30%	18.5%	16.6%
C. The disbandment process	C1. Sentimental with strong attachment to possessions	90%	26%	None
	C2. Pragmatic with no attachment at all	None	39%	91.7%
	C3. Both	10%	35%	8.3%
D. Adjustment to CCRC	D1. Long/did not adjust yet	75%	37%	None
	D2. Quick/from the early beginning	10%	40.7%	100%
	D3. Neither quick nor long	15%	22.2%	None

Note. CCRC = continuing care retirement community.

Another interview illustrates the difficulty this group had in leaving the familiar and beloved home, and the significant part the family had in encouraging, persuading, and sometimes significantly pressuring them to relocate to the CCRC:

I was alone, completely alone, until my grandson came one Friday with his wife, and said, “Grandma, you’re not staying here. I’m going to Dad’s house for the Friday *Kiddush* and we’ll decide what to do.” I said, “OK. I hope I agree with whatever you decide.” The decision was to relocate me to a place such as this one, so that I wouldn’t be alone. The good thing is that they offer you—I think it’s true in all the places—a month’s trial. That was good because the house remained as it was; two weeks later, I came here for a trial period. I saw that I had no other choice. This was the only place for me in my situation.

*Choosing a CCRC and a specific apartment.* Because the “I want it all” group had extreme difficulty detaching themselves from their familiar and beloved home, they tended to choose apartments in CCRCs that reminded them of what they had before, to provide as much continuity as possible. The resemblance might have been about the location, the neighborhood, the internal layout of the rooms, or some other factor. For this group, the size of the apartment is very often an issue in choosing a CCRC, because a larger apartment means being able to bring in more objects and create a greater resemblance to the former home. For example, Varda, who had previously lived in a private house, chose a rural CCRC that offered apartments with a garden. This was not only important to her because she liked growing flowers, but also because gardening had been an important part of life in her former home, and gave her a sense of continuity with her previous life:

So I said, “OK, if this is the way it has to be then [name of CCRC] is the only place I’ll go.” . . . I wish to continue my private life as close as possible to the rhythm of [name of her village]. Maybe that doesn’t mean living in a five-star hotel . . . but here I have my own living unit, whose size, 55 m<sup>2</sup>, suits my needs. I have all the privacy I need and want, I have two rooms, a bathroom, a kitchen [and] a large patio.

The wish for continuity that is evident in the “I want it all” type seems to relate to both the physical and the social environment. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of friends, and others the importance of family:

There is nothing to do here. The truth is she [the daughter] wanted me to move into a CCRC near Tel Aviv, and promised she’d visit me every day. I said to her, “Sweetie, I have friends and acquaintances here. I go [for walks] here. Everything is familiar; I know every stone. What will I do in Tel Aviv?”

I recommend that people who are about to make this decision shouldn’t change neighbourhoods, if that’s where their friends and family are. Moving is hard enough in itself. How should I put it? You move from one house to another, this is enough. This is one shock.

*Organizing one’s belongings in preparation for relocation.* For “I want it all” people, the process of disbandment and having to leave their personal belongings behind tended to be long and emotionally complicated. When asked how they had decided what to take with them and what to leave behind, they tended to use extremely harsh language. Some said they felt their world had crumbled and that they had lost part of their identity when they parted with their belongings:

It was terrible. That was the most difficult thing—the things you possess. . . . And you have to do it; there's nothing else you can do. You have a beautiful table, beautiful furniture. You have a big house, with so many objects that tell you things. Each tells its own story. But there's nothing you can do. You just close your eyes and put them in boxes.

For some of the interviewees the process of sorting out their belongings was so difficult that they preferred their children to do it for them. They seemed to wish that someone else would make the decisions for them. They simply could not do it. Sometimes this helped, but in some cases the outcome was even worse:

I feel they broke my house into tiny bits. Look at all these things. My husband and I bought them with our own hands. No one helped us. And we always tried to buy beautiful things . . . to make our house beautiful and to our taste. But everything was broken into tiny bits.

For these people, considering what they could not take with them seemed to be no less important than deciding what they could take. Because they were emotionally attached to their belongings, many of them thought that it was important that they remain useful to someone. Discarding them as trash was their very last option:

One of my worst pains was not being able to take all my books. There was no room. I had some four or five hundred books, and leaving them behind was very difficult, but I had no choice.

*Adjusting to the new apartment.* For this group, adjusting to the new home took a long time and was hampered with yearning for the old one. Once again, the size of the new apartment kept coming up. The greater the difference in size, the more difficult it was for this group to get used to the new apartment. Nevertheless, some interviewees admitted that although it was important for them to bring as many of their belongings with them as possible, they had no use for many of them, and they remained in their boxes:

Whenever I need anything I go [to the store room] to get it, because I don't have room for it here. If you saw my room you'd be shocked. The bedroom looks like a warehouse right now. Unlike the rest of the apartment, which is quite well organized . . . my bedroom is in terrible shape. There's a ladder in the middle and the floor is covered with boxes.

The difference in size between the old and new homes might have other implications as well, such as the inability to cook for the family because the kitchen is too small, or the inability to have people over because of the lack of space. Some interviewees reported that they had become used to the new home, but in fact they only seemed to come to terms with what they could not change. Generally,

it seemed to be difficult for these residents to feel they belonged in their new residence or even to refer to the new apartment as "home."

### "I Want to Break Free"

*Reasons for moving.* The members of the "I want to break free" group voluntarily moved to the CCRC after having planned the move for a long time. They perceived the move as natural, and tended to emphasize its advantages. They felt that leaving the old apartment and neighborhood, which no longer met their present and future needs, was a positive move. Unlike the "I want it all" group, the family's involvement in the "I want to break free" group's decision making was minimal. Sometimes they told their family about their decision to move only at the final stage:

My apartment is beginning to age. I'm constantly having things repaired and I'm fed up with it. . . . I wanted to relieve [my children] of this responsibility, of caring or worrying. Once I move here, they can relax. If anything happens, I'll have someone to turn to, someone to take care of things, which makes a big difference.

I arranged with the lady in charge to come Friday with my daughter and grandchildren so they can see the place, and see what they have to say, even though I've already decided . . . I'm sure they'll see that this is a good place.

*Choosing a CCRC and a specific apartment.* This group did not seem to have as strong an emotional attachment to their home and belongings. As a result, it was easier for them to see the move from a practical standpoint. They did not make their choices based on similarity to the previous residence or to its design but rather on technical details and on impressions they got from the community's residents and personnel.

The size of the apartment played a secondary role for this group. People from this group indicated that they no longer needed a large apartment, and the difference in the size between their old and new homes did not stand in the way of relocation. Some residents even agreed to move to temporary apartments that were not the ones they had chosen, to avoid delaying their relocation:

I took the smallest house in this wing: two rooms are enough for me.

When I first came here, they didn't have the two-room apartment I wanted. So they told me that they would give me a studio for the time being, and I agreed.

*Organizing one's belongings in preparation for relocation.* The "I want to break free" group members tended to be quite experienced in moving. Some of them had only lived in their previous home for a short period and were not very

attached to it. They did not experience moving to a CCRC as a traumatic event. Moreover, having moved before, they had fewer belongings, making the process simpler. They tended to take with them objects they would use in their everyday life. The principles for selection were practical rather than emotional:

I have no problem detaching myself from objects. When we were traveling, and when I moved from Alfei Menashe to Binyamina, I got rid of many of my belongings. After my 120<sup>th</sup> birthday, my daughter won't have to sit down and say, "I have to throw this away, but oh! It belonged to my mother." I don't need that. She won't have much to throw away.

Because these people did not seem to be attached to their belongings, they did not feel too troubled by having to decide what to do with objects they could not take with them. They were happy to give them to people who wanted them, but unlike the "I want it all" people, they did not care about what happened to the things nobody wanted:

I left one of the two-seat sofas . . . the sideboard . . . the swing, and the large table in the yard. It's very easy for me to give up things I no longer need. I am not a hoarder. What I didn't need I gave away.

*Adjusting to the new apartment.* The members of this group said that settling into the new apartment was simple for them. It did not take them long to feel at home, and some even experienced love at first sight. They described a general sense of well-being after relocating to the CCRC, and they did not miss the home and neighborhood they had left behind:

Q: Do you miss anything from the time before your move?

A: You mean things I had before I moved? Things I miss? Absolutely not. Not at all. I have nothing to miss. Not my neighbours. The people I want to see, I see. But really, really, really not at all. Period. . . . I have no problem with moving or with change. On the contrary, I love change.

### "I Want it That Way"

*Reasons for moving.* Unlike the "I want it all" group, members of the "I want it that way" group did not regard relocation as a sudden adverse event they were faced with for lack of another choice. These people chose relocation to a CCRC after having given it much thought, and they saw it as a positive occurrence. However, unlike the "I want to break free" group, they often postponed their relocation for various reasons, and did not seem to accept it wholeheartedly. This created some initial pressure, but, because they regarded the relocation as a positive event, their concerns disappeared after relocation:

We have been considering this move for many years. We began thinking that it would be nice to move to this kind of place at a certain age, so we tried it once but didn't feel we were ready yet, so we postponed it. . . . Our grandchildren were little at the time and we wanted them to be able to come to the house and run around, so we decided to put it off for two or three more years, and then see.

Gradually we started visiting [the CCRC], sometimes for shows, and I thought, "What would I do there, with all these old people?" It didn't feel right to me at all. But at the same time, we slowly internalized that after all it might be a good move.

*Choosing a CCRC and a specific apartment.* Like the "I want to break free" group, members of the "I want it that way" group did not dwell on the size of the apartment. They tended to place emphasis on other aspects instead, particularly the social environment:

I went to see [the CCRC] in [name of city] but didn't like it. First of all, all the doors of the apartments were closed, with each person in his own apartment . . . so why would I need to move? I already had an apartment, I don't need another one, so I said no, this is not for me. Then my daughter found me this place and said, "Let's go see it." We went there and I immediately said, "This home is fine." I liked that all the people were together.

*Organizing one's belongings in preparation for relocation.* Unlike the "I want it all" group who were extremely attached to their belongings and home and suffered greatly when they had to leave them behind, and unlike the "I want to break free" group who did not care about their old belongings, the "I want it that way" group had mixed feelings. For example, some said that their belongings were not important to them, but immediately afterwards said they would have been happy to have the option of bringing them along. However, unlike the "I want it all" group, they were not paralyzed by this attachment and it did not make their relocation a bleak event. They discovered quite early that having given up certain objects paid off. Unlike the "I want it all" group who wished to take with them almost every object they were attached to, the approach of the "I want it that way" people was more pragmatic, and they chose specific objects they were attached to, such as family heirlooms or objects they used frequently:

Nothing was important to me: it's only furniture and things that didn't matter at all. But we did take a lot of what I had because it was easier, that's all. And to have your own things around you is fun. So that's all. Some of the things were my mother's and, you know, were passed down to me down. I took my armchair—I like to sit in it, that's all . . . and the pictures and the bookcase. They were important to me.

Q: Why? What was the reason for that?

A: It feels comfortable. What do you mean by “What is the reason?” I always sit in it, this is just how I always sit.

Because they were somewhat attached to their belongings, these people tended to prefer giving them to family members or to charity. A good example of this is Haim, who said that he and his wife wanted to take a lot of their things with them, but that it was not possible, and he finally realized these were objects they would never use in the new place. Therefore, at the end of a combined rational and emotional process, he decided to simply throw them away:

A: [I took] some of the things. We didn’t take them all. In the end, when we sold the house, we threw some of them away.

Q: Was there something you wish you’d kept?

A: Many many things. A lot of *schmatta*. You know, over the years you keep collecting and collecting. What can you do?

**Adjusting to the new apartment.** The ambivalence of the “I want it that way” group was apparent in the way they settled into the CCRC. Members of this group were initially concerned about adjusting to their new apartment, but they soon discovered that it was not so bad. Their families also expressed concern about their adjustment, but the residents were happy to prove to their family and to themselves that they had been right to move:

Some things I couldn’t take with me because of the size of the place. Before, I had a large apartment with three large rooms. I had a bedroom with a double bed, and a closet. Here I have a sofa—there’s no room for a double bed. So they told me, “You may never get used to sleeping on the sofa, it might be difficult—it’s narrow and it’s just a sofa.” But I got used to everything, much to my surprise.

## Discussion

The present study was designed to explore the role of objects in the relocation and adjustment of older adults to CCRCs—a type of lodging that is often smaller than their previous homes and cannot accommodate all of their belongings, and is perceived by many people as their last home. Analysis of the data revealed three categories of CCRC residents: the “I want it all” group, and the “I want it that way” group, and the “I want to break free” group. These groups differed in their approach to their belongings throughout the relocation and acclimatization period. The interviews indicated that for most of the residents, thoughts about having to leave certain objects behind played a significant part in the decision to relocate to a

CCRC. Objects, whether they were left behind or brought along, continued to preoccupy the residents for many months after their actual relocation.

According to environmental fit theory (Lawton, Lawton, Windley, & Byerts, 1982), the decision to relocate is associated with the extent to which older adults perceive their surroundings as appropriate for their needs. If the home is in a poor state, or if access to it is difficult, the urge to move to a better-fitting location is stronger. The present research takes this theory further, showing that the objects an apartment contains make an inseparable part of the required conditions older adults strive for. Many interviewees who belonged to the “I want it that way” and “I want it all” groups described the conflict between realizing that the apartment and its surroundings no longer met their needs and understanding that by leaving their home they would also have to leave behind some of the objects it contained. In other words, even though they knew that certain aspects of their physical surroundings no longer matched their needs, their reluctance to separate from their home and familiar and beloved objects made them underestimate the unsuitability of their current home. In some cases, this resulted in postponing relocation until the last possible moment, when there was no longer any other choice.

Continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) posits that older adults make efforts to preserve as many aspects of their lives as possible. Thus, the need to leave cherished objects behind might cause older adults to feel discontinuity, which can negatively affect their psychological well-being. Perhaps because they have experienced many challenges over the course of their lifetime, older adults often keep valued objects that serve as unchanging symbols of the person’s story. Possessions can be a source of great pleasure, from the moment we obtain the desired item to the moment we discover forgotten cherished objects (Luu & Woody, 2017). In the disbandment process, these cherished objects come together as time and place are repacked.

Another aspect that might negatively affect the well-being of older adults who are considering relocating to CCRCs is their attachment to their previous home (Dupuis-Blanchard, Neufeld, & Strang, 2009). When older adults relocate to smaller living spaces, they sometimes perceive the move as a loss of part of their self (Janning, 2017), because personal possessions have historically served to convey not only status and style but also personality (Luu & Woody, 2017). Personal belongings have also been found to be linked to a sense of independence, identity, and privacy (Heywood, 2005). For these reasons, among others, older adults’ realization that they will have to give up cherished belongings, and the disbandment process itself, can negatively affect their sense of well-being.

Another consideration in older adults' decision-making process about relocating to a CCRC is the distance between the CCRC and the previous apartment. Many of the participants in this study moved to a CCRC that was located in a different city, sometimes miles away from their previous home. Although in most cases they made this decision to be close to family members (Barken & Lowndes, 2018), moving so far from their previous place of residence might cause some people to feel completely uprooted from their familiar community. In such cases, the move will require additional adaptation to a whole new environment, including service providers, such as bank tellers and physicians. The role of cherished objects as a link between past and present might be even more critical for people facing these changes.

Indeed, some of the people we interviewed indicated that personal belongings were among the features of their past life that they wanted to perpetuate. Most of the interviewees admitted they were emotionally attached to objects, and said that this attachment influenced their well-being. By bringing along certain objects and designing the new apartment similarly to the previous one, the residents were able to maintain continuity, with objects serving as a common thread, making the new apartment feel like "home" (Rowels, 2006). Residents of other long-term care facilities have also asserted that personal belongings help create a homey atmosphere (Nord, 2013).

In our study, we found that people whose relocation was pre-planned and voluntary and those who were forced to move had different attitudes about parting with their belongings, and that they adjusted differently to the new home. When relocation and the preparations that preceded it were well managed, unhurried, and free of pressure, the entire process was under control (Ekerdt et al., 2004). However, some residents who were unable to sort through their belongings in a level-headed, relaxed, and unhurried manner. This sometimes resulted in them discarding or giving away objects that were actually important to them. This group of people seemed thus to suffer doubly: while resigning to separate from objects they could not take along, they also gave up objects that, with hindsight, they could have brought along.

Another significant factor in older adults' disbandment processes is the involvement of family members. Other studies (Ekerdt & Sergeant, 2006) have shown that the family was involved not only in cases where its members pressed for relocation but also when the idea and the decision originated in the older adults themselves. It is no wonder, therefore, that the literature describes the relocation of older adults from their home to the CCRC as "a family affair" (Perry & Thiels, 2016). The present research revealed that in addition to being involved in opting for and carrying out the relocation, family members also have a part in the disbandment process. Most of

the residents stressed the negative aspects of this involvement, whether during relocation or in retrospect. One possible reason for this negative reaction is that it weakened the older adults' involvement in the selection of and separation from their objects, which sometimes resulted in throwing away emotionally valuable items at the family's will. This may have to do with the different ways their family members perceive the significance of certain objects (Perry & Thiels, 2016). The literature notes that over-involvement of family members is particularly intense when relocation occurs hastily (Wilson, 1997). This was exactly the case with the majority of the "I want it all" group, where an unexpected event required urgent relocation, in contrast to the "I want to break free" group and most of the "I want it that way" group.

"Feeling at home" is an important indication of having adjusted to a new location. This is a natural, fundamental, and common wish of every human (Rowels, 2006). The present study showed that many members of the "I want it all" group, who had difficulty separating from their belongings, also experienced greater difficulty adjusting to their new location and regarding it as "home." To overcome these feelings, they brought as many objects as possible from their previous home, to make the new place look similar to the one they were used to. This strategy is in line with continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) and is not surprising: these people wanted their new apartment to reflect their personality through their belongings. Yet, while this theory encourages taking certain steps to maintain continuity, not all the steps that older adults take to this end are conducive to adjustment. The solution of keeping as many objects as possible might be effective if the new apartment is similar in size to the previous one (Perry, 2015). However, as our study shows, bringing as many objects as possible into the CCRC often does not yield the desired result. Every cupboard, shelf, or bookcase brought into the apartment to store those many objects reduced the already limited free space that was left for the resident, and undermined the apartment's comfort and visibility. Thus a vicious cycle is created: residents' difficulty letting go of their belongings made them bring extra objects, but these additional objects overcrowded the small living space and prevented creating the homey atmosphere they were seeking. In other words, the inanimate objects overtook the place of the living.

### Limitations

While this study contributes to the current knowledge about adjusting to CCRCs, it is not without limitations. First, this is a qualitative study which is limited to post-move perspectives of current CCRC residents. As such, it does not allow for assumptions about cause and effect. Future research that interviews older adults just before

their move to a CCRC, and continues to follow them years after the initial enrollment, would help more fully understand the course of adjustment to change. Second, although we attempted to reach maximum variations regarding CCRC residents and CCRC characteristics in the sample, the sample may be skewed by the omission of residents who had already left the CCRC or those who had not been approached about the study by the personnel.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (ISF), Grant Number #801/13.

### ORCID iD

Ohad Green  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7436-7695>

### References

- Atchley, R. C. (1989). A continuity theory of normal aging. *The Gerontologist*, 29, 183–190. doi:10.1093/geront/29.2.183
- Ayalon, L., & Green, V. (2013). Social ties in the context of the continuing care retirement community. *Qualitative Health Research*, 23, 396–406. doi:10.1177/1049732312468506
- Ayalon, L., & Green, O. (2015). A Typology of New Residents' Adjustment to the Continuing Care Retirement Community. *The Gerontologist*, 56, 641–650. DOI: 10.1159/000366161
- Barken, R., & Lowndes, R. (2018). Supporting family involvement in long-term residential care: Promising practices for relational care. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28, 60–72.
- Billig, M. (2006). Is my home my castle? Place attachment, risk perception, and religious faith. *Environment and Behavior*, 38, 248–265. doi:10.1177/0013916505277608
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*. New-York, NY: Basic books.
- Cutchin, M. P., Marshall, V. W., & Aldrich, R. M. (2010). Moving to a continuing care retirement community: Occupations in the therapeutic landscape process. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 25, 117–132. doi:10.1007/s10823-010-9113-y
- Dupuis-Blanchard, S., Neufeld, A., & Strang, V. R. (2009). The significance of social engagement in relocated older adults. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19, 1186–1195.
- Ekerdt, D. J., & Sergeant, J. F. (2006). Family things: Attending the household disbandment of older adults. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 20, 193–205. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2005.10.001
- Ekerdt, D. J., Sergeant, J. F., Dingel, M., & Bowen, M. E. (2004). Household disbandment in later life. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 59(5), S265–S273. doi:10.1093/geronb/59.5.S265
- Heywood, F. (2005). Adaptation: Altering the house to restore the home. *Housing Studies*, 20, 531–547. doi:10.1080/02673030500114409
- Janning, M. (2017). *The stuff of family life: How our homes reflect our lives*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kahana, E., Lovegreen, L., Kahana, B., & Kahana, M. (2003). Person, environment, and person-environment fit as influences on residential satisfaction of elders. *Environment and Behavior*, 35, 434–453. doi:10.1177/0013916503035003007
- Kroger, J., & Adair, V. (2008). Symbolic meanings of valued personal objects in identity transitions of late adulthood. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 8, 5–24. doi:10.1080/15283480701787251
- Krout, J. A., Moen, P., Holmes, H. H., Oggins, J., & Bowen, N. (2002). Reasons for relocation to a continuing care retirement community. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 21, 236–256. doi:10.1177/07364802021002007
- Lawton, M. P., Lawton, M., Windley, P., & Byerts, T. (1982). Competence, environmental press, and the adaptations of older people. In T. O. Byerts, M. P. Lawton, & P. G. Windley (Eds.), *Aging and the environment: Theoretical approaches* (Gerontological Monograph . . . of the Gerontological Society, No. 7, pp. 97–120). New York: Springer.
- Lieberman, M. A., & Tobin, S. S. (1983). *The experience of old age: Stress, coping, and survival*. New-York, NY: Basic Books.
- Luu, M., & Woody, S. R. (2017). Hoarding: Features, assessment, and intervention strategies. In M. R. M. Day & G. J. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Self-neglect in older adults: A global, evidence-based resource for nurses and other healthcare providers* (pp. 41–56). New-York, NY: Springer
- Nord, C. (2013). A day to be lived. Elderly peoples' possessions for everyday life in assisted living. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27, 135–142.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). Purposeful sampling. In *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. In M. Q. Patton (Ed), *Qualitative research* (pp. 169–186). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Perry, T. E. (2015). Make mine home: Spatial modification with physical and social implications in older adulthood. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 70, 453–461. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbu059
- Perry, T. E., & Thiels, J. F. (2016). Moving as a family affair: Applying the SOC model to older adults and their kinship networks. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 19, 74–99. doi:10.1080/10522158.2016.1157845
- Roth, E. G., Eckert, J. K., & Morgan, L. A. (2015). Stigma and discontinuity in multilevel senior housing's continuum of care. *The Gerontologist*, 56, 868–876. doi:10.1093/geront/gnv055
- Rowels, G. D. (2006). Commentary: A house is not a home: But can it become one? In Mollenkopf H., Rothenbacher & D., Rott C. (eds) *The many faces of health, competence and well-being in old age* (pp. 25–32): New-York, NY: Springer.
- Snyder, A. (2017). Objects as symbols for meaning and happiness. *Gonzaga University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, 2017. 10288335.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

- Sugihara, S., & Evans, G. W. (2000). Place attachment and social support at continuing care retirement communities. *Environment and Behavior, 32*, 400–409. doi:10.1177/00139160021972586
- Tracy, S. J. (2012). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wiles, J. L., Allen, R. E., Palmer, A. J., Hayman, K. J., Keeling, S., & Kerse, N. (2009). Older people and their social spaces: A study of well-being and attachment to place in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Social Science & Medicine, 68*, 664–671. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.11.030.
- Wilson, S. A. (1997). The transition to nursing home life: A comparison of planned and unplanned admissions. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 26*, 864–871. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.00636.x
- Young Spokane, L. S., Shaw, B. A., & Krout, J. A. (2009). Comparison study: The impact of on-site comprehensive service access on self-reported health and functional status of older adults. *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association, 10*, 167–173. doi:10.1016/j.jamda.2008.09.003

### Author Biographies

**Ohad Green** is currently a post-doctoral research officer at the University of Oxford. His main research areas are transitions in older age, migrant care workers, and online parenting interventions.

**Liat Ayalon** is a clinical psychologist and a Professor at Bar Ilan University. Her current interests concern mental health, formal & informal care and ageism.