Out of Place in Sheltered Housing? Insider and Outsider Perspectives

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Geographers have over the last two decades used spatial metaphors to illustrate the ways that social differences (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and class) are experienced and represented within and between spaces and places, and how they influence the spatial interactions of individuals. These social differences have been shown to impact on the way spaces are read and experienced as inclusionary or exclusionary.

Within disability studies the social model of disability has shifted attention from individual pathologies of disability to the social construction of disability and geographers have added a spatial dimension to this understanding. Recent literature (Chouinard 1997; Dyck, 1995, 1996; Gleeson, 1999; Imrie, 1996) demonstrates how disability is produced by, and in, different spaces and societies, reflecting the ways that the value judgements of a dominant group are assimilated and reproduced as society's norms and values.

This paper uses sheltered housing, a form of segregated, special needs housing, in Britain to illustrate the role of place in the socio-spatial construction of disability. A 1948 British government document attributed the name `sheltered housing' to housing schemes designed for older people located in sites `sheltered from the wind' (Ministry of Health's 1948 Housing Manual). Today the clustering of 30 to 50 flats or houses built around a communal lounge and supported by an on-site linked warden service are the hallmark features of sheltered housing designed to facilitate independent living for older people. These unique features of sheltered housing define it as a spatial phenomenon characterised by real boundaries delineating and distinguishing sheltered space from wider society.

Research Design

Drawing on the experiential data of people with disabilities1 the paper explores the role of place (in relation to sheltered housing) in the negotiation of the identities of wheelchair users and their experiences of social inclusion and/or exclusion. Evidence is drawn from 50 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with wheelchair users, aged 18-64 years, living in different types of housing in the city of Dundee.

Dundee, is an old industrial city on the East Coast of Scotland that is currently redefining itself socially, culturally and economically in the new global economy. Dundee's city council has been forward thinking in its planning and provision of special needs housing and in particular sheltered housing. The city's excellent track record on sheltered housing (Public Health Alliance, 1993) has been achieved through the city council consistently meeting and exceeding national guidelines set for this type of housing (City of Dundee District Council, 1993). As the City Council and housing associations strive to provide suitable housing for Dundee's wheelchair users the city's surplus sheltered housing stock has been utilised to accommodate people with disabilities under the age of 65. The current practice of randomly scattering wheelchair users in their early twenties through their

fifties in sheltered housing schemes across Dundee is impacting on individual experiences of disability.

This paper is structured around the two heterogeneous groups that emerged from the analysis of the data: insiders, those living in sheltered housing, and outsiders, those living in housing integrated within mainstream housing. The creation of this dualism deconstructs the concept of people with disabilities as a singular entity and reconstructs them as two heterogeneous groups. This binary division is used to illustrate the spatial contingency of experience; that is, where people live influences how they view the world, how accessible the world is to them and how included they are in society.2

Findings

The experiences, perceptions and readings of the landscape of sheltered housing held by insiders and outsiders were mixed. Insiders experienced sheltered housing as both enabling and disabling. Their readings of the spaces of such housing were based on real experiences and the extent to which sheltered housing could and was meeting their housing needs. In contrast, outsiders perceived sheltered housing as characterized by social disabling barriers such as stigma, dependency and exclusion. Their perceptions were viewed through the lens of, and appeared to be prejudiced by, prevailing social and cultural discourses. Table 1 summarizes the enabling and disabling features of sheltered housing as perceived and experienced by insiders and outsiders. This paper elaborates on three of these features: warden alarm system, communal lounge and stigma.

Table 1: Enabling and Disabling Features of Sheltered Housing as Perceived and Experienced by Insiders and Outsiders

Enabling Features	Disabling Features
Experienced • Physical Proximity of Warden • Security • Independence	Experienced • Socially Constructed Space for Older People • Social Exclusion • Physical Barriers
Perceived/Anticipated • Communal lounge • Social interaction • Companionship • Community	Perceived/Anticipated • Segregation • Stigma • Surveillance • Dependence

Insiders

A warden alarm system and a communal lounge are the two prominent features distinguishing sheltered housing from mainstream housing. Each feature is explored below and in so doing the concept of sheltered housing is problematised as being both an enabling and disabling environment for insiders.

On-site Warden Alarm System

All insiders were connected to their on-site warden through an alarm system that they could activate

by pulling on one of the many ceiling to floor cords in the rooms of their home. They could also activate the alarm by a pendant worn around the neck. Insiders were reassured that should they need help, they had the technology to call their warden and that he/she was close by. The alarm was rarely used by insiders, but it was perceived as an asset, an `insurance policy', enabling them to live independently.

Technology is essentially aspatial, it has the capacity to eliminate space and time. It was not, however, the spatial and temporal aspects of the warden alarm that were functional for insiders, but the physical proximity of their warden who responded to their call for help. Insiders knew that help was close by should they need it. The technology of the alarm was utilised as a device for summoning help, but it was the warden, offering place-based help, that was critical for engendering within insiders a sense of security and independence.

However, a caveat is called for here, for the provision of a warden alarm system appeared to be encouraging dependency on it to generate help in an emergency, and in the process, inadvertently discouraging people from interacting with their neighbours and developing positive neighbourly relations. This suggests that the combination of the warden and alarm could be threatening traditional neighbouring patterns of reliance on neighbours for help in times of need (see Cope, 1999).

Susan: Do you find that people are generally helpful around here and that you have people to rely on if need be?

Laura3: No. Nobody.

Susan: Does that concern you?

Laura: Well I've got the alarm.

It is difficult to deduce whether the limited neighbouring that insiders were experiencing is related to their warden alarm system or is simply a manifestation of modern neighbouring patterns. Any negative impact that may be attributed to the warden alarm system was, however, perceived by insiders to be outweighed by the accrued benefits the system conferred to them. Thus, whilst the alarm system was maybe encouraging dependency on the technology (Cope, 1999), it was also encouraging and engendering a greater sense of freedom to live away from the parental home or a residential home. There may be an alternative explanation as to why there was limited social interaction occurring between insiders and their neighbours that is related to other unique features of sheltered housing: the communal lounge and the concentration of older people within an enclosed space.

Communal Lounge

The communal lounge was designed to act as a focal point within sheltered housing for neighbours to participate in mutual social activities. Work by Hudson, et al. (1996) and the Anchor Trust (1986, 1994) indicates that older people are benefiting from this facility whereas this study found people with disabilities felt unwelcome and excluded from participating in communal activities in sheltered housing.

Helen: No-one told me when I came here that this is a colony of elderly people, which means the grey hair, white hair people. There are only really two people that I can talk to here. So I visit Jill on Monday and I see Elaine now and again. This was a major mistake coming here. ... A year at the complex comprises of a fund raising bingo, a Christmas party, a concert which is old folks singing and I'm not very enthusiastic about.

The quotation above is indicative of insiders' explicit wish for their communal lounge to function as an inclusive space, that is a space that can accommodate differences between tenants. Helen intimates that some of the problems that people with disabilities are facing in sheltered housing stem from it being socially constructed as an exclusive space for older people. This is illustrated by insiders' experiences of an internal majority and homogeneous group (with regard to age), within sheltered housing schemes, feeling empowered to erect boundaries delineating the inclusion and exclusion of people to their social activities. Consequently people with disabilities were feeling `out of place' in the social spaces that housing providers had deemed as suitable for them.

The social barriers outlined above were implicated in the continued marginalisation, disempowerment and exclusion insiders experienced in relation to their housing. These social barriers were found to be creating greater difficulties and were perceived to be more (dis)abling than the physical barriers they encountered in relation to the general design of sheltered housing schemes.4 However, insiders felt that housing practitioners, in the allocation process, defined housing needs as synonymous with physical and medical needs, in other words, with the `bricks and mortar' of accessible housing. Many suggested that the allocation process was inflexible and was unable to account for the physical and social housing needs of people with disabilities.

The use of the example of sheltered housing is illustrative of the importance of place in the process of social exclusion experienced by people with disabilities and the complex social relations associated with the constitution of both identities and spaces. The older people within schemes, coupled with the involvement of housing practitioners in the allocation process were influential factors impacting on insiders' sense of self, their experience of sheltered housing and disability.

Outsiders

The following section reverses the lens focused on sheltered housing and examines the landscape of such housing as viewed by outsiders, people with disabilities living in housing integrated within mainstream housing.

Stigma

`Places are avoided or viewed with apprehension where a stereotype of a despised group combines with and reinforces a negative stereotype of place' (Sibley, 1998:120). Outsiders viewed sheltered housing as stigmatising, providing for the needy and weak in society, and reinforcing negative images of people with disabilities. Whereas they perceived integrated housing to be equated with being a part of able-bodied life.

Kevin: I feel safer that way, [integrated into mainstream housing] because I don't like these rows of houses where you've got all disabled people. Coz it goes back to the stigma. I find it is very, very important for me to meet others, non-disabled people. ... I've got something in common with disabled people, but that's where it stops. I like to get away from it. ... Everyone deserves to be treated as an individual.

For Kevin, and other outsiders, place matters in the construction of his identity. He did not identify with other people with disabilities, and he thus anticipated feeling `out of place' in sheltered housing. Furthermore, he believed that he could not be `an individual' in such housing, as he predicted that outsiders and support staff would perceive him first and foremost as a disabled person rather than moving beyond that weighted imagery to see a `normal' person who used a wheelchair.

Through exploring outsiders' perceptions and experiences of sheltered housing, it is apparent that sheltered housing, as a social space, is containing and reproducing an ableist discourse. Outsiders identified with, or aspired to identify with, culturally defined concepts of the normal body through living in integrated housing. In so doing the benefits accrued to insiders from living in sheltered housing

were overlooked by outsiders who perceived independence from the `shackles' of a culturally defined disabled identity as impossible inside segregated housing schemes.

The spatial contingency of identity formation that is evident in the experiences of both outsiders and insiders reveals the power of place to produce and reproduce boundaries to the social exclusion and inclusion of different social groups. Imaginary and tangible boundaries, perceptions and experiences of places do not always and need not be consonant, but they influence how landscapes are read and interpreted and who is included or excluded, consciously or unconsciously, from our own living spaces.

Carol: ... for me sheltered housing has the stigma attached to it. "Oh we're no goin' near that scheme, that's got, its all disabled people."

Re-evaluating Sheltered Housing

The working practices of housing practitioners appear to be embedded within an ableist discourse that is grounded in the medical model of disability and embodies a fear of difference. Sheltered housing presently serves to maintain perceived social boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, `between same and Other' (Wilton, 1998, see Sibley, 1995) by providing a space where people with disabilities are hidden, where they are outside the public gaze.

Sara: They provide you with all the adaptations you need, but keep you out of sight, always in the corner of schemes, always separate. I've always believed in integration not segregation.

Sheltered housing was perceived by outsiders to be (re)producing negative disabled imagery and as a social space was seen as being implicated in the stigmatising of a certain group of people and certain places. It is thus understandable that outsiders considered the spatial segregation of people with disabilities, through their housing, as inhibiting moves towards greater social inclusion for all within British society. By resisting sheltered housing as an enabling living environment outsiders were challenging the status quo and present policies and practices. Throughout the UK there `is a sense that sheltered housing has become "fossilised" within an outmoded framework. This has spawned a host of reports that call for dramatic change in the design of schemes' (Fisk, 1999:35).

One salient feature to emerge from this study that could inform the future design of sheltered housing is that such housing needs to build on the success of diminishing the physical distance between disabled housing and mainstream housing. Not all sheltered housing schemes are spatially segregated or physically different from mainstream housing. Rows of tenement flats in Dundee have been renovated and transformed inconspicuously into sheltered housing. The unique features of sheltered housing that are valued by insiders exist without the stigma perceived by outsiders. This form of housing could be crucial in meeting the holistic housing needs of people with disabilities in the future.

Beverley: This is just a normal street, you can't tell it's sheltered. But I have the cords, the warden's good, I mean if I'm really bad, he phones, "Are you needing anything, will I come along and make you a cup of tea?"

Conclusions

The experiences of people with disabilities living in sheltered housing and their perceptions of the concept of such housing are ambivalent. Insiders did not problematise the spatial separation of sheltered housing from mainstream housing nor its associated negative imagery. As Helen indicated, her experience of feeling socially isolated in sheltered housing taught her to prioritise the social and demographic characteristics of future neighbours. She felt that on becoming an insider the physical appearance and associated cultural perceptions of buildings were not as important as the social

make-up of the people inside the buildings. Helen's philosophy illustrates an acceptance and tolerance of difference and, in addition, the underlying concept that sheltered housing is favoured by insiders, but not in its present form.

In contrast, outsiders could not conceive of themselves living in sheltered housing. The very mention of it conjured up ideas and images of stigma, dependency and surveillance. Outsiders identified with or sought to identify with the able-bodied majority and living in integrated housing helped them assimilate that assumed identity and feel `normal.' Outsiders constructed imaginary boundaries between themselves and the spaces insiders occupied.

This study demonstrates that people and places, and perceptions of people and places, are critical in influencing the ways people negotiate their identities, the type of housing they want to live in and how socially included they feel. The experiences' of insiders and outsiders illustrates the ways that social differences, and specifically disability, are produced both socially and spatially. Recognition by policy makers and society at large of the socio-spatial nature of disability could herald an important step on the road to questioning and changing present ableist values and future housing for people with disabilities.

Notes

1. All references to people with disabilities in the paper refer to people aged 18-64 years.

2. Despite working within a postmodernist framework that seeks to deconstruct binary divisions, the insider/outsider dualism is adhered to. Even when one works within a postmodernist framework dichotomies persist and can be useful as a means of reconstucting data into a comprehensible form. In this way the dualism has been utilised to highlight, rather than obscure, the fluidity and spatiality of the experiences of people with disabilities.

3. All the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms with the exception of Susan who was the interviewer and is the author of this paper.

4. Overall insiders encountered few problems with the design of their own home, but were faced with steps at the entrance to neighbours' homes and in some instances into their communal lounge.

Acknowledgements

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