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Belonging and exclusion: a study of older residents in a manufactured home village in Sydney

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Abstract

There has been much discussion about the decline of community and attenuation of social ties in contemporary urbanism. This qualitative study of older people resident in a manufactured housing village (MHV) in north-west Sydney illustrates that in certain circumstances neighbourhoods can be characterised by a strong sense of belonging, community and reciprocity. The research showed that almost all of the interviewees felt they had strong social ties in the neighbourhood and could rely on their fellow residents for assistance. The connectedness was premised on the urban design of the village and homes, lengthy residence, homogeneity and a sense of safety. Also, because most residents were retired and had limited resources, they spent a great deal of time in the village. This further encouraged interaction with fellow residents. A major concern for interviewees was the site rent which accounted for a large proportion of their income and contributed towards social exclusion. The research suggests that MHVs, if the site rent is kept at a reasonable level, can be a positive housing option, especially for people who cannot afford the conventional homeownership route.

Introduction

This is a study of older residents who live in ‘manufactured homes’ in a manufactured homes village (MHV) in the Sydney area.ⁱ This urban space is a sociospatial form that, as Wensing et al (2003) conclude, has not ‘been subject to close scrutiny’ in Australia. The MHV has an unusual tenure form in that residents own their own homes, but not the land on which their home is located and thus have to pay a site rent to the land-owner. As will be illustrated, this can be a key negative aspect of MHV living. However, despite the difficulties caused by the site rent, what this study shows is that living in a MHV is not necessarily a wretched option. Almost all of the interviewees were very positive about their accommodation and living situation and felt that their MHV was characterised by a strong sense of community and belonging.

In 2001 it was estimated that about 61,000 people lived in caravan parks / MHVs (Wensing, et al 2003). Although MHVs constitute less than one per cent of all households, they are an important accommodation option for older people who are not homeowners (Beckwith 1998; Mowbray and Stubbs 1996; Wensing, et al 2003). The data indicate that a large proportion of MHV residents are retired people whose financial situation precludes them from purchasing conventional homes but allows them to enter the more affordable manufactured home market (Newton 2006).

The paper first sketches the context and outlines the methodology used. It then explores interviewees’ perceptions of the social ties and sense of belonging and community in the village. Management of the area and the centrality of the site rent are then reviewed. This is followed by an analysis of exclusion faced by residents. A key

question that the paper addresses is what accounts for the strong sense of community in the MHV under review. Other important questions explored are the impact of the site rent and, related to this, the social exclusion and limited capabilities experienced by residents.

The context

The MHV which is the focus of this study is in Sydney's north-west and is about 30 kilometres from the CBD. When first established in the early 1980s it was located in the middle of a dairy farm, about three kilometres from the nearest suburb. Since 2000 there has been substantial development in the area and residents now have residential areas, a shopping centre and other services very close by. There are a total of 412 sites of which 280 are reserved for manufactured homes and the remainder for tourist accommodation. At the time of the interviews (end of 2006), about 95% of the residents were over fifty. Residents have to pay a weekly site rent which at the end of 2006 was between \$125 and \$130 a week. In return, the owners are responsible for security (at the entrance there are boom gates which can only be opened if you know the code); maintaining the common areas; garbage collection and for providing roads and community facilities (there is a hall and swimming pool). They also have the power to determine who lives in the village and there is a raft of regulations which residents are expected to adhere to.

The homes vary in size and quality. Almost all have two-bedrooms; less than 10 have one-bedroom and about five homes, have three bedrooms. Many have well-tended gardens – some are immaculate. The eastern part of the village has a settled, salubrious feel. In the western part, where the older homes are, some of the homes are relatively

shabby and there are a few vacant lots. This area is adjacent to the tourist area which has about 80 caravan sites and about 20 cabins available for hire.

Methodology and profile of interviewees

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 residents. The interviews were organised around the following themes; the processes which led to interviewees moving to the area; perceptions of accommodation and the neighbourhood; interviewees' views of the site rent and its impact on their capability to live a life they value. All of the interviews were conducted in participants' homes. This was useful as it was possible to view their accommodation. Recruitment of interviewees was done with the help of one key person who had been a resident for many years and knew most of the residents.

One interviewee was sixty, four were between 65 and 69; seven between 70 and 75 and three were over 75. Only two of the interviewees were living with a partner and one was living with her adult daughter. Besides the one couple interviewed, seven of the interviewees were female and seven were male. Only two interviewees had been living in the village for less than five years; eight for between five and nine years and five for 10 years or longer.

Sense of community and belonging

Fourteen of the 16 interviewees were adamant that the village was characterised by a strong sense of community and neighbourhood attachment. Helenⁱⁱ (66), who had been living in the area for 12 years, commented:

It's more like the old fashioned community used to be. You haven't seen someone for a while you think, 'I hope the person's okay.' We'd go and call and see if they're okay. People sort of care about each other and look after each other here. I have lived in units ... and you don't see anybody. It's very, very lonely and even in ordinary houses outside most people work. Here you find they don't [work] and it's a more relaxed atmosphere and everybody sort of knows each other and looks after each other here. That's why I feel happier here.

Helen's observation raises some important explicit and implicit points. The village is reminiscent of a time when urban spaces were characterised by not much movement and the private home was less bounded and privatised. Because many of the residents did not work and had limited resources, most spent a great deal of their time in the village and they had time and the inclination to engage with their fellow residents. Their similar lifestyles and circumstances contributed towards residents feeling comfortable with one another. Rick (70) commented, 'Well it's not like living in the suburbs [where] you don't seem to get to know your neighbours but here it's like a big family and it's a good atmosphere'. The link between homogeneity and strong social ties in a neighbourhood is well-recognised (Fischer 1976).

The size, design and placement of the homes certainly facilitated social interaction. None of the homes have more than a strip of front and back lawn and they are very close to one another. The boundaries between properties are vague; there are no fences of note and the streets are narrow and double as pavements. This allows neighbours to witness the comings and goings of their fellow residents and to engage with each other from their verandas. The high density means that everybody is in walking distance. This encourages

use of the public spaces and interaction with fellow residents: 'Yes you walk past [and] say, "Hello, hello". Everyone talks to you even if you don't know them. If you walk around the street they say, "Hello. How are you?"' Everyone just talks' (Ellen, 72).

The urban design is in line with that propagated by the new urbanists who argue that the built environment can play a critical role in encouraging social cohesion and community (Talen 1999). Duany and Plater-Zyberk (1992), for example, conclude that in order to encourage strong communities and social interaction, homes need to be close to the street, not too large and have verandas which face the road. Gardens ought to be minimal. High density, narrow streets and the ability to walk to friends are also viewed as important. The MHV has all of these features.

Sue (67), who moved into the village in 1989, painted a picture of genuine *gemeinschaft*. Her comment suggests that the design of the village was an important contributory factor:

The other thing that is great about it ... is the sense of community. The fact that I leave my doors open all the time. I could ring up and say, 'Could you get my washing in', because, people do help each other. If someone collapses in the street they don't walk over like they would out there and not want to get involved. They'd call somebody. The ... majority of people help each other. There's no need to be lonely. Walk around the street at three o'clock in the morning and there'll be someone else walking around or someone sitting on their veranda having a smoke or taking their dog for a walk. It's very quiet even though the people are living so close to each other ... The people are there if you want company but they don't intrude.

Mary's comment paints a picture of a neighbourhood that is characterised by a culture of reciprocity, strong social ties and belonging. She also highlights the perception that it is a safe space so that residents are able to walk around the neighbourhood.

The age of the residents and the frailty of some, added to the appreciation of the sense that there was always somebody to turn to. Reciprocity and assisting friends and neighbours in need was an important part of the village culture:

We all get on well with one another and if you want any help they're [fellow residents] there. I mean cos I was taken sick four times so far [this year] and Helen came and Alison came and got the doctor up here for me ... It's good (Joyce).

Management and the site rent

The persistent endeavours by the owners to increase the site rent had evoked much anxiety and some residents were concerned that in time MHV living would not be affordable:

Well the things that have changed is the fear that people now have. When they were ... enticed in [to the village], they had no financial worries. The site fees were easy to pay out of their pensions ... and now there's the fear of not being able to stay. You know people walking around talking about 'I might have to go

and live with my son or I might have to go and live with my daughter.' I mean they don't want to do that and they're scared they're going to [have to] ... (Sue).

The increases had mobilised the residents. At the time of the interviews 138 of the 268 households had joined the Park Residents Association (PRA) whose main task were to contest the rent increases. In 2006, the landlord applied for a \$19 increase in the site rent, however, after representations to the Tribunal by the PRA, the increase was restricted to \$9.50. The \$9.50 increase meant that a person living by him/herself who was dependent solely on the age pension and Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), would have had to spend about 40% of their income on the site rent. The struggle around the site rent had been accompanied by a change in management style. Interviewees complained that management had become more intrusive and demanding. The power of management to intrude in the lives of residents of MHVs has been noted in earlier studies (Newton, 2006; Purdon, 1994). The interviewees located in the western part of the village were especially aggrieved. They had been placed under tremendous pressure to move to make way for the tourist site and between 2000 and 2006 about 80 residents had been moved from this area. The extreme uncertainty had resulted in property prices in this part of the village plummeting. One bitter interviewee, who had paid \$45,000 for his home in 2001, at the time of the interview in December 2006, said that he would be fortunate if he got \$2000.

The financial situation of residents, capabilities and exclusion

Those residents whose sole source of income was the pension and CRA were struggling to live a life they valued and avoid social exclusion. The financial situation of residents was not uniform. Some interviewees had savings and superannuation which gave them more possibilities. Also, assistance from family members varied. However, most of the residents interviewed were mainly dependent on the government age pension and CRA for their income. Those interviewees who were partnered were in a better position as they were drawing two pensions.

At the time of the interviews all of the interviewees felt that they had the means to purchase enough food, although some residents said that they found it difficult to purchase an adequate amount of fruit and vegetables. Eight of the interviewees had a motor car and, although a major expense, it was viewed as essential, as it gave them the freedom to engage in other activities and visit friends and family beyond the village. Some of the car-owners were extremely concerned that if the site rents continued to increase they would not be able to keep their car on the road.

Residents' capabilities to engage in more complex functionings (Sen 1999) were certainly affected by their limited income and the amount they had to expend on site rent. Rod (66), painted a bleak picture:

My site fees and other costs of living; house insurance; petrol for the car; telephone bills. At the moment I'm averaging about \$60 a fortnight to live on [referring to food]; \$40 for petrol ... \$25 for telephone; other personal commitments. Then rent on top of that - \$290 a fortnight rent. Doesn't leave much out of \$621 ... I get by eating-wise but I don't socialise; I don't go out; I don't go clubbing; I don't smoke; I don't drink.

Paul (65) was divorced but was very keen to repartner. His limited resources made this very difficult:

If I wanted a social life ... it's a worry for me ...not having the car because for example a lady just got in touch with me ... She lives at P.... and wants to meet . . . Now the thing is when they have a car ... I feel kind of disadvantaged because I was used to being a bread-winner. I was used to having a trades person's good income but now you worry obviously how much they would expect you to spend on them ... It is uncomfortable I find and I hope not to be a handbag for some lady but you know to be accepted as someone on a pension ...

Conclusion

The village represents a social space which undermines the argument that urban life is necessarily dominated by increasing individualism and a lack of community (Wirth 1938). Many of the residents had a strong sense of belonging and were concerned about their fellow residents. This finding is similar to that of Mowbray and Stubbs (1996) who found that MHV residents 'were happy with their life on the estate liking ... its community atmosphere and security'. The study suggests that the urban design of the MHV, combined with the social composition of the area, encouraged strong social ties and neighbourhood attachment. That all of the older residents were in a fairly similar situation certainly contributed towards mutual respect and civility. Ironically their limited

financial resource heightened their interdependence and interaction with their fellow residents. The fact that they almost all had limited income and were burdened by the site rent, were not working and many did not have a car (and those that did had to use them sparingly), meant that most residents spent almost all their time in the village. Social cohesion was also strengthened by the struggle around the site rent. A final factor that is important is length of residence. As indicated, many of the interviewees had been living in the village for many years. Neighbourhoods characterised by lengthy residence are more likely to have a strong sense of community (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). The study illustrates the dangers of presuming that neighbourhoods that are constituted by marginalised groupings are necessarily characterised by bleakness. Whilst life was often a struggle, and interviewees' capabilities were restricted by their limited resources, the site rent being a major contributor, there was also much contentment.

Notes

- i. Manufactured homes are usually made of wooden framing with composite timber cladding and colour bond roofs. They are factory built and then transported to the designated site. They have all the conveniences of a conventional home; one, two or three bedrooms, a living area, a bathroom, toilet (often separate), hot water and electricity.
- ii. All the names used are pseudonyms.

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