Traversing Dynamic Zones of Visibility and Invisibility in Person-Environment Relations: Implications for understanding intergroup penetration and identity (trans)/ formation

Athena McLean
Central Michigan University and Irish Centre for Social Gerontology
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This paper is a preliminary attempt to explore how the visibility and invisibility of a *home environment*, and perceptions of its associated risks to an older resident, might offer clues for understanding the **larger social** processes by which *"others"* are perceived as visible or invisible and variously risky. Such perceptions have potential consequences for social exclusion or inclusion of persons and groups regarded as "other" and may impact processes of identity formation as well. In exploring relationships between these sets of processes, I will **(1) present some findings about visibility and invisibility** derived from a study of Irish elders in their home environments. I will then **(2) consider the relevance of these findings for understanding processes of "othering, drawing examples** from a first person account of a minority in Ireland and from the situation of the Irish Traveller population -- a minority group that since the 1950s has undergone increasing social exclusion and changes in identity and social location within Irish society.

The paper builds on ethnographic research I conducted in Ireland last year with older persons residing in the Dublin area. The research was part of the larger TRIL (Technology Research for Independent Living Study) study, concerned with developing viable technologies for helping people remain in their homes, and avoid needless or premature moves to residential care facilities. Our team of ethnographers [1] discussed our findings concerning environmental challenges imposed by macro-structural changes *(e.g.,*

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population increase, congested traffic, a stressed health care system, economic pressures to move or remodel), as well as the everyday challenges of navigating home environments in face of the physical and cognitive impairments imposed by aging *(but adjusted by available social and structural supports and resources*)**.** In particular, we attempted to understand the degree of stress experienced by older persons maneuvering new, altered, and unchanged physical environments, and to learn what aspects of those environments and the person's relations to them elevated their stress, alarm, or sense of risk. Our discussion led us to consider the extent to which the "visibility" or" invisibility of environments might impose risk, or conversely reduce risk by allowing for a seamless navigation.

In another paper (Mclean and Roberts 2008), I argue that the person/ environment relation -- from which we generated our ideas of visibility and invisibility -- as a relation of adaptation is inadequate for understanding the profound impact of environments on people. It is necessary as well to examine the emotional quality of environments for a person, given her history of relationships, meaningful associations, and attachments to familiar things within them. Environments are not simply empty vessels with which people interact (Malpas 2003:346). Rather, embodiment occurs in persons through place identity with environments and objects in them (Rubinstein 1989; Peace et al. 2005:197). Similarly, processes of social inclusion and exclusion of particular populations do not occur in neutral environments, but are embedded in a deeper history of social, political and economic relations, that includes connections to places and things. What can be gained by examining the micro-relations between persons and their home environments are the ways in which risk is associated with environmental visibility, invisibility, or the blurred zones that lie

between. This may offer clues into the risks or danger associated with changes in visibility of groups or persons construed as "other".

For an older person residing in a familiar environment, there is a comfort level that derives from a long history of sensorial and intersubjective accommodation. As Nahemow, a theorist of person-environmental adaptation concludes, the longer one has occupied an environment, the more taken for granted, or invisible the environment becomes. This is why even highly cognitively impaired persons may be able to get around well in their homes, but feel lost and very confused in unfamiliar environments (2000:25). This has to do both multisensorial accommodation of persons within a familiar environment over time as well as with place attachment or emotional rootedness (Tuan 1974) to it and objects in it (Oswald and Wahl 2005:30).

TRIL Study Findings: Visibility, invisibility and risk in micro-environments

I'll move on now to briefly describe three case studies from which my research team derived our observations about visibility, invisibility and risk in the homes of elders we studied in Ireland, and then offer my own summary of conclusions.

(1) **Ms. McGovern** was a 93-year-old woman who had resided in her current home for over 60 years. Despite moderate dementia, and her reliance on a walker to move about, she navigated the three floors of her home and the challenges of uneven floors and multiple corners and narrow passageways between rooms. (She relied on a full-time caregiver, a woman had lived there almost as long as Ms. McGovern.) I was amazed by the complexity of space she had to navigate, and with her permission took many pictures of the serpentine staircases, multiple rooms, uneven floors and tight corners.

To me, as to her bathing assistant, the environment looked fraught with potential hazards and risky to navigate. But to Ms. McGovern navigated fluidly and steadily from room to room. The second floor, where her bedroom was located, lacked a bathroom, so she had to go either upstairs or downstairs to use it. I marveled at solidly she carried herself, holding on tightly to the railings on each side of the door, as she walked down the stairs. She seamlessly navigated the environment as if it were invisible to her. The only time it became somewhat visible, and destabilizing to her, was when she landed downstairs and was ready to choose either her walker of cane to help walk to the living room. She hesitated, as she told me, "I'm not supposed to use both," but did. At that point, she moved more awkwardly, until I offered to hold her cane and she again moved on smoothly.

(2) **Mr. Briar** was a 78-year-old man who had lived in his current residence for the past forty years with his wife, who died two years ago. He had suffered a fall in the past, and was unsteady on his feet, so was somewhat hesitant in moving around for fear of falling again and injuring himself. He navigated around the house by reaching for secure anchors. In order to heal some of his loneliness, and to economically help out his daughter and husband, he invited them to move into home and eventually to own it. He permitted them to gut the house and to completely renovate it to their liking. Everything was changed, even the bedroom that had come to fit him like a glove. As a result, the familiar setting, with all the invisible anchors he had embodied in his daily maneuvers were no longer there. He would go to reach for one and realize that it was gone. This created stress and an increased sense of vulnerability. Due to the environmental uncertainly and newness, he found himself **feeling hypervigilant**. The **environment became very visible to him**, as he tried to navigate it and learn the new anchors on which he could depend. He felt

particularly vulnerable when he moved onto the new deck, which was one level down. As he walked down to it he would reach for an anchor that did not exist, but that wrongly appeared visible in his mind. This provided a special hazard, since his tendency still was to reach out, and he could become unsteady on his feel in the process. In addition, his daughter completely modernized the furnishings as well, including decorations and pictures, so all of the objects which served as a reminder of the years he had spent with his wife were now gone, severely weakening his attachment to place. It was as if he had to start all over.

(3) Mrs. Casey had similarly sustained a fall that made her feel unsteady and insecure on her feet. Like Mr. Briar, she had bequeathed her house to her daughter, who was having several structural renovations, although it was not completely being gutted. In contrast to Mr. Briar, she was planning to move into a granny flat that was being built adjacent to the house. For the first year of renovation and construction, she moved into an apartment. Then she moved back into the house, in spite of continuing construction. She found the noise, and continued relocation of her belongings by workers during this in-between stage of completion to be very stressful and upsetting. Because of the prolonged period of disorder and noise, she was also upset that she could not invite her friends over for tea. She found herself increasingly distressed, and she fell twice during this period, once, coming down the staircase, injuring herself.

Analysis: the danger of transitions and in-between zones of visibility

In the case of the elders in the TRIL study, low environmental risk occurred in situations where people had accommodated to familiar environments so long and comfortably that they were taken for granted and remained invisible, perhaps because they

were in fact not experienced as independent. Indeed Ms. McDonald, seemed inseparable

from her environment, which for her seemed almost a "natural" habitat, because of her

strong place attachment to it. That is why she seemed so easily to navigate it in spite of her

dementia. Low risk also was associated with objective potential hazards that were clearly

marked, or identifiable, like the staircase, because one could deliberately attend to it and

avoid its hazardous potential. Indeed Ms. McDonald was able to navigate it well by

recognizing and taking care to solidly hold onto both banisters.

In contrast, and counter to expectation, high risk was *not* perceived in environments

where objective material hazards, like staircases, or ladders, were clearly visible or marked.

Rather, from the experience of the occupants in our study, they occurred in situations of

ambiguity or" in-betweenness" -- in places that lacked, or had lost familiarity, or were in

transition and disruptive. Neither situation fostered comfort to those who inhabited them

or could be backgrounded and taken for granted. Because such environments were now

not familiar, they were seen to house unknown, invisible, risks the occupants had not yet

identified. For this reason, the elders were highly vigilant of them, and these environments

ironically became *more visible* for that which they did not reveal.

For Mr. Briar, there was yet an additional hazard of residing in the very same space

to which he had developed over some four decades attachment to both place and its

contents, neither of which remained. While the space was the same, the place was not. Yet

his embodiment had occurred in the former place to which he remained intersubjectively

engaged, if only imaginatively (Riley 1992. This led him to hazardously reach out for anchors

no longer there, destabilizing him and putting him at risk for falls. His inability to recognize

his now renovated made it dangerous to him, and paradoxically more visible because of the stress both from lost anchors and new unidentified risks.

Similarly, for Mrs. Casey, the chaos imposed during the period of transition by the construction, and ongoing relocation of her possessions created disruption and uncertainty about when she could resume her life once again. This period of ambiguity and transition was also fraught with risks, as seen by the falls she sustained.

Thus risk in these cases was not associated with objective visibility in environments, but rather with the ambiguity accompanying change, uncertainly, transition and a period of liminality that was fraught with danger. It was the risks associated with this ambiguity that made them hypevigilant. No longer were the elders able to relax in a place to which they had long accommodated both physically and emotionally, over time. For the residents, they had lost their intimacy and "existential insidedness" (Rowles 1980; Riley 1976) and could no longer be taken for granted.

Visibility, invisibility, and "danger" of minorities in Ireland.

How might these findings translate/ relate to the larger social processes of social exclusion by which certain groups are marked as dangerous, and needing vigilance? Cultural geographer Glenda Laws has described how that space has been used to structure social relations across time (1997), foregrounding some groups while backgrounding others. This is why many older people (myself included in Ireland last year) experience an implicit ageism of space where "youth is everywhere" (Peace et al. 2005:194). In the little time that remains, I will consider the TRIL findings with regard to the changing situation of the Travellers in Irleand. (I should point out that I am pulling on secondary references, and have

not done research before in this area.) The Travellers are an itinerant minority group who have lived in Ireland for at least eight centuries (Fanning 2002). Up until

Conclusion

While visibility clearly marks danger, the **greatest *perception* of danger** *(whether of the environment or of persons in it)* occurs with the transition from invisibility (w. hidden or contained risk) to visibility (which announced it). (This in-between period can also be a period of recontexualization [Leibing 2007:145], and uncertainty.) However, the perception of danger of the potentially risky environment for the elders varied somewhat depending on their competence to navigate it. Similarly, the perceptions of the negatively marked person or group was also colored somewhat by the relations of the *marked* person or group with other persons or groups. Thus while avoidance or sustained ignorance of the visibly marked person served to preserve her/ his identity as dangerous "other," getting to know a marked person might somewhat reduce or minimize that risk, transporting that person toward invisibility. Depending on the circumstances, this could occur either through the demands of assimilation or their acceptance as different. For example, an Indian woman who received her graduate education in Ireland and married an Irishman describes how she was variously perceived as visibly exotic and dangerous by those who kept a distance or accepted for her knowledge of Western cultural understandings by those within her and her husband's personal circle. However, to become acceptable, she had effectively assimilate, and hide those aspects of her identity that remained Indian (Fitzgerald 1992:9).

Also of relevance for the Travellers was the **power of place**, and the *danger of place (or placeness)*, and its implicationsfor those who are without place either by choice, for the

Travellers. or fate for the displaced. As landscape architect Robert Riley observes, "ordinary landscapes can also be powerful through their oppressiveness" (Riley 1992:20). In a world view where organic links connecting people to land (Fanning 2002:50) naturalize belonging, the Travellers who were landless, could not possibly belong. But, as with the Australian aborigines' Dreaming, connection to place is not confined by fixed dwellings. Still, the *absence* of fixed roots to specific places were the source of political and social oppressiveness for the Travellers. The value of place is its connection to meaning, but meaning is relevant only to those who are seen as having attachment to place; those who lack such attachment are not so privileged. Thus the local, which privileges some against others, provides a justification for this is why Jeff Malpas is reluctant to

2. Laws, on how space is used to structure society, creating visibility or backdropping.

First describe Kirsteva's abjection, right below.

Mary Burke (   ) argues: The strategy of distancing is implicit in the use of the words 'gypsy' and 'nomad', which connote that these people are somehow foreign, and most explosively, in the use of 'gypsy', that they are actually British. (Within the British Isles, gypsies are from Wales and England only.) The word gypsy is a dispossessing of their Irishness, and it is easier to be cruel to what is constructed as being outside the self in a new state where the ideology of nationalism is uppermost. The pollutant must be contained, kept at the margins - linguistic and literal distancing. They carry the pollution of all; they are what Kristeva would define as the *abject*.

From Felluga on Kristeva (Powers   ): ACCORDING TO JULIA KRISTEVA in the *Powers of Horror*, the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The abject "is radically excluded and," as Kristeva explains, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (*Powers* 2). It is neither object nor subject; the abject is situated, rather, at a place before we entered into the symbolic **the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to breakdown, where we are confronted with an archaic space before such linguistic binaries as self/other or subject/object. "On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object,**

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etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (Kristeva:207, cited in Felluga)

In addressing zones of inclusion and of exclusion, Nikolas Rose asks, "How have these novel practices of abjection been made acceptable and tolerable?" (1999:253). It may be that the privileging of visibility predisposes an immediate distancing, a prejudging or closing off as dangerous that (or rather, he or she) with whom one might otherwise connect intersubjectivity to defy, or challenge an automatic "othering."   That may be why some critics have questioned the dominance of an "ocular epistemology" (Leibing 2007:145). The visual has indeed served to reinforce the spatialized distancing that emerged with the generalizations of modern science (Malpas 2003:2345). At the same time, we can see how the dominance of a localized *excluding* world view can similarly foster distancing and abjection. By raising the "specter" of danger and vulnerability, It guarantees a refusal of the other and obviates any hope of engaging the other "face to face" on ethical terms (Levinas 1969). As Jeff Malpas rightly observes, "Moral or ethical life always requires an ability to look beyond our own place to other such places, to take account of different ethical and moral situations, and to navigate and negotiate between them. …the spatial frame that opens out from our own place to other places and other persons…has to be seen as part of that place in which we ourselves are" (2003:2348). Only by suspending our assumptions about ambiguous zones and tentatively reframing them as safe, might we be able to directly face our vulnerability through the other . In so doing, we might succeed in radically reframing the abject as the ethical.

Notes

1. The Ethnographic Research Unit included Athena McLean, Cathy Bailey, and Cormac Sheehan from the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, National University of Ireland, Galway, and Simon Roberts, of INTEL Ireland.

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