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Life lines: Loss, loneliness and expanding meshworks with an urban Walk and Talk group

Jessica Muir[a], Laura McGrath[a,*]

[a] School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, Stratford, London E15 4LZ, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

There is ample evidence that loneliness and social isolation are important in the development of distress, and harmful to recovery. UK mental health services, however, have been moving away from interventions which prioritise relationality, and towards professionally-led, individualised treatments. In addition, those experiencing distress experience multiple spatial exclusions which can compound isolation and loneliness. This paper examines the role of an urban Walk and Talk group in the lives of long term mental health service users. Using an ecological frame, Ingold's concept of 'meshwork' is used to explore the complex of social, personal and spatial relationships which contribute to participants' experiences of everyday living. Four themes are explored: Fading lines: Fossilised meshworks of loneliness and loss; Therapeutic nodes: Atomised sanctuary and respite in everyday space; Reciprocity and authenticity: Strengthening relational meshworks; and Remaking everyday spaces: Revitalising meshworks through collectivity. The findings are discussed in light of the literature on loneliness, relationships and mental health interventions.

1. Introduction

People need other people. True independence - for everyone, well, or ill - is rooted in social connection; without this, it is mere isolation and loneliness. This deep need for connectedness is insufficiently acknowledged throughout the whole of our society […] But the lack of it hits the mentally ill [sic] particularly hard since it is so often failures of social connection, particularly in early life, that cause such disorders [sic] in the first place.'Recovery', if it is to happen, must address this (Taylor, 2014: 252–3).

Barbara Taylor, writing here in her memoir 'The Last Asylum' reflects on the differences between her own experiences of asylum care in the UK in the 1980s, and the current system. Critiquing the current British policy language of 'recovery' and'choice', she argues against the idea that those using mental health services need to avoid 'dependency' at all costs. These ideas, Taylor argues, in line with survivor activist groups such as 'Recovery in the Bin' and 'Mental Health Resistance Network', have been used to cut support for people experiencing mental health difficulties, and also limit the quality and depth of relationships which can be fostered through and with mental health care. This includes the reduction of spaces where those experiencing distress can go and be with others, without having to engage in specific, time limited, professionally-led activities (Bloomfield and McLean, 2003; Moriarty et al., 2007). McGrath and Reavey (2016) characterise such an approach as a 'helicopter service', arguing that services have become more distant, short term, and individualised. Rather than leading to 'independence', Taylor argues that such atomised, de-spatialised and distancing services only compound experiences of isolation and loneliness central to many experiences of distress (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010; Warner, 2000).

There is indeed ample evidence that loneliness and social isolation are important in the development of distress, and harmful to recovery (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010; Warner, 2000). Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010: 3) outline the substantial evidence that loneliness is causative of many forms of distress, stating that a "perceived sense of social connectedness serves as a scaffold for the self—damage the scaffold and the rest of the self begins to crumble". In addition, long term service use has also been found to sometimes entrench social isolation, compounded by experiences of stigma (Sayce, 2000), as well as social and economic exclusion (Rogers and Pilgrim, 2014; Wickham et al., 2014). These ongoing impacts can be seen in the fact that long term service users tend to have smaller social networks, which are more dependent on family, than those who are not service users (Estroff, 1981). Characteristic of long term distress and service use, therefore, can be a shrinkage of social networks and connections (Levitas, 2006; Rogers and Pilgrim, 2014), often characterised as reduced 'social capital' (Putnam, 2001). Silva et al. (2005) systematic review indeed found an inverse relationship between social capital and levels of distress, both in terms of numbers of connections and the felt quality of those connections.

Compounding such experiences of social and economic exclusion are the spatial exclusions also faced by those experiencing distress. A body of literature in human geography (Parr, 2008; Davidson, 2000;

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: l.h.mcgrath@uel.ac.uk (L. McGrath).

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Curtis, 2010) and social psychology (Smith and Tucker, 2015; Tucker, 2010, 2013; McGrath and Reavey, 2015, 2016) has mapped the hostility of public and everyday community spaces to those experiencing distress and crisis. These echo Goffman's (1963) classic argument that public space has more stringent rules of behaviour and emotional expression than private space. These limitations can lead to feelings of exclusion, judgement, shame and fear for people experiencing current distress, leading to further retreats to the home (McGrath and Reavey, 2013; Davidson, 2000) or other safe private spaces (Pinfold, 2000). Knowles (2000: 221) similarly found that "remaining *invisible* is the price of using public space" for homeless service users trying to navigate hostile public spaces; whilst her participants were able to remain in consumerist public spaces, such as shopping malls, it was only on the proviso they did not attract the attention of other customers and discretely maintained a façade that they were partaking in ongoing consumption.

The shrinkage of space in mental health care described by Taylor above, therefore, can be seen to be compounded by further exclusions and difficulties in public space for mental health service users. This hostile landscape is, we argue, detrimental to the fostering of social connection needed for 'true independence' of a connected life, rather than the isolation and loneliness described by Taylor. If mental health services are to address the loneliness central to so much distress, we argue that holistic interventions are needed which address not only individual cognitions or biology, but the social, spatial and emotional assemblages of people's lives. To make this argument, we draw on the experiences of participants of a Walk and Talk group in an inner city urban environment, and propose an ecological framework for understanding and addressing distress in context.

2. Ecological theory: Ingold's meshworks

Ecological approaches posit that people are, at a fundamental level, organisms immersed in environments from which they cannot be separated (Bateson, 1972; Ingold, 2000, 2011; Gibson, 1986; Kelly, 2006; Lewin, 2013; Capra and Luisi, 2014). Ingold (2011: 95) argues: "The environment is, in the first place, a world we live in, and not a world we look at. We *inhabit* our environment: we are part of it; and through this practice of habitation it becomes part of us too". This inter-relational perspective is influenced by process philosophy (see Whitehead, 1978), which challenges the bifurcation of nature into subject and object (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). It highlights that understandings of individuals' subjectivities cannot be gained without a holistic consideration of the material and social contexts in which they live. An ecological ontology also proposes that life and living beings are never static but are always in process: "For minds and lives are not closed-in entities that can be enumerated and added up; they are open-ended processes" (Ingold, 2015: 11). Thus, humans, like other organisms, are characterised by processes of growth, becoming and movement that are intrinsically related to the world they inhabit. This focus on the processual nature of experience conveys that the relationships individuals form with their surroundings are never stable but constantly evolving.

A core concept emerging from this perspective is that everyday spaces function like systems that are dynamically shaped by forces including social-material conditions, events, memories and emotions, which interweave in complex ways to expand or contract subjective experience, to offer or shut down possibilities for action. Ingold (2011) uses the metaphor of line and wayfarer to convey the embodied experience of moving through and making interconnected places. He argues that the 'lines' individuals lay become knotted with those of others to form 'meshworks':

> Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with each other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot. Places, then, are like knots, and the threads from which they are tied are lines of wayfaring. A house for example, is a place where the lines of its residents are tightly knotted together. But these lines are no more contained within the house than are threads within a knot. Rather, they trail beyond it, only to be caught up with other lines in other places, as are threads in other knots. Together they make up what I have called the *meshwork* (Ingold, 2011: 149).

The 'meshwork' is here understood as the process of living with others, at once entangled together, located in particular, embodied, material locations, and yet still not wholly defined by that location, due to the unique paths which each person has forged through the world:

> This tangle is the texture of world […] beings do not simply occupy the world, they *inhabit* it, and in so doing - in threading their own paths through the meshwork - they contribute to the ever-evolving weave (Ingold, 2000: 66–7).

It is this sense of living in space as being characterised by a set of embodied activities with others, which we wish to expand in this paper. Human geographers, in particular, have offered understandings of space that challenge Euclidean conceptions of it as simply a container, in which things happen or are held (Hubbard and Kitchin, 2010; Massey, 2005; Parr, 2008). Instead, space is viewed as in flux and interwoven with social, political and economic phenomena (Hubbard and Kitchin, 2010). (Massey 2005: 9) argues that space is recursively produced through heterogeneous "interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny". Thus, people's subjectivities, and the everyday practices through which they express them, both produce and are produced by the manifold spaces through which they move (Valentine & Sporton, 2009). Ingold's work further deepens this perspective by bringing to the fore the ways in which people grow together through shared relationships and activity. He emphasises how through weaving our lives together, we constantly draw upon, use, make, and remake the material and relational substances of our environments.

In this way, an ecological perspective has resonance with other moves in psychological theory that emphasise the distributed and embodied nature of psychological properties, including cognition (Chemero, 2009), perception (Gibson, 1986) and emotion (Maiese, 2011). If the substances of the environments in which we live are active participants in constructing agency, action and feeling, then what does this mean for those living with long term experiences of distress, isolation and loneliness within the limited and hostile spaces described above? We might, through this framework, understand loneliness as a curtailed experience of meshwork, and envisage that a person who is socially isolated may have a meshwork with less activity, growth or fewer connections than a person who feels socially connected and has a life full of possibility. As such, this concept bears some similarity to the idea of social capital (Putnam, 2001) or social network analysis (Scott, 1988). We use the concept of meshwork here, however, to capture the personal, subjective experience of space through time; of the web of a person's own relationships, memories, activities and actions, as they stretch back through time and project forward into the future. Thus Ingold's concept will enable us to explore the holistic socio-spatial experiences of people experiencing distress in the community.

2.1. Community spatial interventions: situating the walk and talk group

The project explored in this paper was a Walk and Talk (WnT) group which has been running weekly for several years in an inner city location in the UK. The group was originally set up by a Clinical Psychologist, but has been peer led for most of its life. Walks are weekly, vary in their focus and location, and offer a regular, informal space in which to walk and talk with others. The group was inspired by Guy Holmes' WnT group in Shropshire, begun when service-users suggested that walking in the countryside may "repair some of the damage done to [them] by toxic environments" (Holmes, 2010: 217).