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The role of bluespaces in experiencing place, aging and wellbeing: Insights from Waiheke Island, New Zealand[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how bluespaces inform experiences of place, being aged, and wellbeing among seniors on Waiheke, an island within the greater Auckland area in northern New Zealand. We draw on photo-elicitation interviews with seniors aged 65–94 to argue that bluespaces shape metaphors of 'islandness' that, in turn, help maintain wellbeing. We conclude that, although island settings pose unique challenges for seniors, (e.g. potential isolation, and a lack of advanced care), drawing on the qualities of bluespaces helps maintain a secure sense of self anchored in strong affective ties to place.

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1. Introduction

Bluespaces and islands are mutually interdependent, with water defining the topographic character of an island. In response to the call for research on the emotional and experiential response to bluespace (Völker and Kistemann, 2011), we examine the significance of bluespaces in the lives of older people on Waiheke Island. Waiheke is the most populous island in the Hauraki Gulf which surrounds the eastern coastline of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Here, the permanent population of 8340 includes a higher proportion of residents aged 65 years and over than elsewhere in the Auckland region (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). On Waiheke the sea can invariably be glimpsed as one travels around the island and is often visible from peoples' homes. While there is a widely-acknowledged therapeutic connection between people and water (see Andrews and Kearns, 2005; Foley, 2011), Conradson (2005) reminds us that therapeutic experiences cannot be presumed but rather are the product of peoples' diverse and complex relations with place. In this paper we tease out relations between the lives of older residents and the bluespaces that encircle their lifeworld.

In the broader context of 'aging-in-place' policies, we argue that a therapeutic landscape experience occurs as a result of interactions between seniors, the landscapes of everyday life, and the broader social contexts that shape these settings. While the concept of aging-in-place has many meanings (Pastalan, 1990), it generally denotes the ideal of aging 'where you are' through remaining in one's current location and maintaining a stable independent lifestyle (OECD,

2003). Most seniors express a preference for aging-in-place because they desire to maintain control and autonomy over their lives. It is reasonable to assume that residents of an island setting may well prefer to remain 'in-place' as they age. A question that warrants exploration is how an island, given its encirclement by the sea, contributes to the experience of wellbeing. This concern is relevant because aging-in-place is not only a demographic or political issue, but is also an emotional and lived *experience* that inherently involves the broader place of residence.

There is general recognition that everyday places shape, and are imbued with, meanings that influence how advanced years will be experienced especially in terms of health and wellbeing (Andrews and Phillips, 2005). Our concern is understanding the role of bluespaces and their therapeutic properties as they contribute to wellbeing during aging. Specifically, our concern is *how bluespaces inform experiences of place, being aged and wellbeing for seniors living on Waiheke Island, a bounded space within reach of a metropolis*. In exploring this theme we necessarily reserve consideration of other aspects of support in the lived experience of older people to subsequent papers.

In the contexts of everyday life, 'being aged' is infused with a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to grow older—most frequently these centre on images of decline, disability and the 'end of things' (Kiata-Holland, 2010; Wright-St Clair, 2008). Further, being of advanced years is commonly perceived in terms of having limited time and a lack of futurity (Wahl et al., 1999; Golant, 2003). Stereotypical discourses involve frailty, dependence, incompetence, or senility (Hurd, 1999). While these discourses have the capacity to constrain seniors' behaviours (Wearing, 1995), many authors illustrate instances of resistance (e.g. Wiles and Allen, 2010; Jones, 2006). We seek to go beyond taken-for-granted notions of aging to understand how island-bound seniors experience later life in light of the relative ubiquity of bluespaces.

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2. Aging, place and insularity

We initially turn attention to the ‘island geographies’ literature which seeks to study islands on their own terms as islands (Royle, 2001; Connell, 2003). Two key characteristics of island life are isolation (evident in the purposeful journey – usually over water – to reach the separate world of the island); and boundedness (referring to the distinct physical boundaries of islands that allow one to picture the island as a whole) (Royle, 2001). Islands are never entirely closed systems (due to links with the mainland such as the outgoing and incoming flows of people/goods), yet their boundaries are nonetheless clearly defined and their space is restricted. The experience of such places has been expressed by the term ‘islandness’, which is preferred to the more negatively-toned ‘insularity’ and highlights the separateness, boundedness, isolation, vulnerability and smallness of islands in contrast to the more expansive mainland (Baldacchino, 2004; Royle, 2007). In relation to Waiheke, we can consider the ways in which islandness contributes to how the environment is framed and experienced in seniors’ activities and imaginations.

Island life is often characterised by a “powerful sense of community and kinship that consolidate a common heritage, shared places and social knowledge” (Royle, 2007:42). Further, because they have often been socially constructed as paradise, replete with treasure and dreams (e.g., in popular literature, music, and within tourism publicity), a sense of intrigue often infuses imaginaries of islands (Hoffman and Kearns 2013).

An alternative construction of the island as a literal or metaphorical prison also infuses popular consciousness. This notion has been strengthened by the historical use of islands for detention and quarantine (indeed nearby to Waiheke, Motuihe Island served as a prison in World War I). While an island like Waiheke may be imagined by some as a paradise it could also have carceral qualities if, for example, essential resources and services cannot be accessed due to financial or mobility limitations. The bluespace surrounding islands can therefore both enable a sought-after separation from the mainland or impose an unwelcome distance from opportunities, especially for those who place a greater value on travel and maintaining wider social networks.

We are concerned with how experiences of being aged on Waiheke are formed in relation to the character of the island itself, including its symbolic and material features. Such a concern suggests questions such as how bluespaces encircling the island shape islandness itself and loom large as sites of personal connection involved in the reproduction of place attachments that inform the experience of being aged. Hence, in this paper, we are interested in everyday experiences, the role of memories and sentiments and the material characteristics (e.g. size and reflective character) associated with sea and sky that seniors suggest are important to the experience of being aged on Waiheke Island. This concern emphasises the role that place plays in enabling seniors to craft a present and future self. As Cutchin (2001) notes, meanings related to being aged are not only located within the self but also develop through the daily challenges faced and opportunities encountered through human engagement in everyday places. Cutchin (2001) has thus called for investigations of aging-in-place that are future orientated and sensitive to peoples’ context. We respond to this call in order to investigate how bluespaces may act as a resource to assist independent life and support wellbeing.

3. Place, metaphor and wellbeing: Bluespaces in older people’s lives

Peace et al. (2011:734) argue that “the significance of place and the importance of situating the self” become particularly important as people age. ‘Place attachment’ – or the (re)production of

affective, cognitive and behavioural ties to a physical location as a result of the meanings and daily functions positioned within it (Rowles, 1978; 1983; Hidalgo, Hernandez, 2001) – has been widely explored as particularly important to the experience of being aged (see, for example, Lager et al., 2012; Milligan, 2009; Peace et al. (2011). These studies have demonstrated aging and place attachment as reflecting diverse acts of meaning-making that ultimately inform an older person’s decision to remain aging-in-place (Lovqvist et al., 2013). The pioneering work of Rowles (1978, 1983), for example, illustrates how everyday social exchange over time, daily routines and familiarity within particular places (e.g. the home) produces an ‘insideness of place’ during later life. In other words, place is accentuated the more it generates a deep sense of belonging (also see Relph, 1976). More recently, Wiles et al. (2011) have illustrated aging-in-place as advantageous to seniors since it promotes a sense of connection and feelings of security and familiarity in relation to home and community settings. The implication is that the diverse meanings which seniors assign to both aging and place and the emotional aspects of place may be harnessed to promote wellbeing during later life.

Living in neighbourhoods that offer physical beauty (e.g. views of seascapes such as are found on Waiheke) can positively influence experiences of daily life and wellbeing. Michael et al. (2006), for instance, suggest that seniors’ opportunities for wellbeing are increased when there are local places where natural beauty can be enjoyed. Mahmood et al. (2012) suggest that older people who consider their neighbourhoods to be aesthetically pleasing are more engaged in everyday activities and intentional physical exercise. In their study of older women living alone, Walker and Hillier (2007) found that beauty within the neighbourhood encouraged people to leave their homes and venture outside, which facilitated a sense of involvement in, and connection to, the world. This observation (that natural beauty can counter isolation) aligns with claims about the potency of the sights and sounds of water bodies (Williams, 2010) and that a sense of place in ‘waterscapes’ is connected with emotional wellbeing (Whalley, 1988). Others have claimed bluespaces have stress-reducing, mood-enhancing powers (Karmanov and Hamel, 2008).

People who live in coastal localities like Waiheke commonly report an intense and enduring bond toward these settings despite inherent challenges, such as distance and fewer services (Peart, 2009; Kearns and Collins, 2012). As Thompson (2007) notes, coastal dwellers often express deep emotional connections to the coastline itself. Larson et al. (2013) suggest that beauty and condition of the environment are important present and future values for coastal dwellers and inform affective ties to place. Kellert (2005) describes coastal places as eliciting emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual opportunities for personal development since these environments frequently evoke an ‘attitude of reverence’. This disposition reflects the “mythic beauty and physical attraction” that is often perceived as inherent to coastal places (Kellert, 2005, 18). These settings are commonly interpreted as possessing restorative benefits since they offer opportunities for stillness, reflection and respite. Phenomena such as water, sunsets, cloud patterns and the wind, may prompt moments of stillness that are engrossing and instigate effortless reflection (Kaplan, 1995; Kearns and Collins, 2012). Hence, living close to bluespaces, as Waiheke residents do, has the capacity to generate and sustain emotional and spiritual connections, as well as opportunities for physical activity, which may benefit health and wellbeing.

The concept of place attachment can be considered alongside attention to metaphors of place. Metaphor may be particularly important during aging since it offers a discursive coping strategy that can support the maintenance of daily life by offering a creative response to change and challenges. Because the edge of an island is

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