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Towards Inclusionary Geographies?

Hester Parr

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Series Editors' Preface

The RGS-IBG Book Series only publishes work of the highest international standing. Its emphasis is on distinctive new developments in human and physical geography, although it is also open to contributions from cognate disciplines whose interests overlap with those of geographers. The Series places strong emphasis on theoretically-informed and empirically-strong texts. Reflecting the vibrant and diverse theoretical and empirical agendas that characterize the contemporary discipline, contributions are expected to inform, challenge and stimulate the reader. Overall, the RGS-IBG Book Series seeks to promote scholarly publications that leave an intellectual mark and change the way readers think about particular issues, methods or theories.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In the nineteenth-century West, 'the mad' were segregated in special asylum spaces and labelled as ill. In the twentieth century, these spaces were dismantled and patients discharged into the community. In the twenty-first century, 'community care' is still in vogue, but what has happened to the people with mental health problems? Stories of neglect, ghettoization, homicide and re-institutionalization regularly litter the pages of newspapers and academic journals. Is this the whole story? Are those with severe and enduring mental health problems still living on the edges of society? Is the figure of the mental patient still one characterized by silence, essential difference and stigma? This book answers these questions by taking the reader on a particular journey through different kinds of environments and communities, some of which purport to facilitate the empowerment and integration of this consistently marginalized group.

The present book has been influenced by findings from over a decade of research on questions of mental health, well-being and illness. During my doctoral research in Nottingham in the early 1990s with the Nottingham Advocacy Group (NAG) and the Nottingham's Patient's Council Support Group (NPCSG), I became acutely aware of the struggle for voice and representation among people with mental health problems. Accessing organizations who were juggling the demands of committee meetings in order to influence the local agendas of health services managers, at the same time as providing a network of support through the wards and mental health centres of Nottingham, made it clear to me how an effective politics of mental health could be scaled from the body to the city and beyond. I am still indebted to those individuals around NAG and NPCSG who inspired my research on shifting individual and collective identities of people with mental health problems. In many ways, the changes that I witnessed then – small and large movements achieved as a result of dedicated and sustained work

by these organizations – helped to shape my own ‘hopeful epistemologies’ of mental health. These have continued to lay at the heart of my research agenda, as further explicated in the following pages.

My research has always skirted the edges of medical services and spaces rather than being squarely situated within them. As a result, my thinking about people with mental health problems as more than just ‘patients’ has been enriched by multiple encounters with this diverse group of people in parks, pubs, streets, hostels, residential placements, drop-ins, homes, projects, offices, art studios, gardens and Internet chatrooms, to just name a few relevant locations. It is in and through these spaces that many people with severe and enduring mental health problems (to adopt a controversial phrase common in current service and social policy circles) trace out innovative journeys allowing them to subvert popular readings of themselves as inert, dangerous, incapable or just plain scary. In an age of deinstitutionalization, people with mental health problems are not simply ‘cared for’ in the community, or always sitting in smoky hostels or out begging for food (although this does occur). Rather, a range of everyday geographies of community life are now ones routinely inhabited by this group, often in ways that demonstrate significant human agency, creativity and even resistance to restrictive social norms and medicalization.

An innovative ‘third sector’ of user-led and voluntary organizations is assisting with this ‘reoccupation’ of the city and other places, and this book critically evaluates evidence relating to these efforts in connection with natural, artistic and technological spaces of social and psychological encounter. At bottom, this book argues that people with mental health problems are active in rescripting their own social recoveries from a stigmatized and static figuring of ‘mental patient’, and more so, that their understanding and use of different social spaces is central to this process. Such an argument does not ignore the real dangers of more mobile subjectivities that are effected in this process, nor the implications of a neo-liberal active social citizenship in which vulnerable people are considered responsible for their own welfare and acceptance in diverse local communities. The story contained in this book is hence inevitably partial, and the considerable social pressure currently arising to reinstitutionalize those considered ‘mentally ill’ risks disappointing the story of hope represented here. As we come to understand further the complexity of social and psychological difference-making in Western and other societies, it is clear that further spatial segregation is a real threat to the *re*-conceptualizations of ‘horror’ that have occurred as a result of proximity to embodied mental health problems in different localities, and also as a result of both the community care policy and the efforts of ex-patients and their carers to belong in everyday places. This book strategically considers examples of these efforts and the social and psychological stabilities that can be effected as a result of them.

I have numerous people to thank for their help in the production of this book and the research which has accumulated in its making. Firstly, the organizations with whom I have worked have inspired me to think differently about mental health, and many people associated with them have given their time and stories to me in ways that were not always easy. In this regard, I wish to thank Ecoworks in Nottingham; Redhall Gardens in Edinburgh; the Coach House Trust in Glasgow; St Mary's Garden in Hackney; the Walled Garden in Perth; the Trongate Studios and Project Ability in Glasgow; Art Angel and Luna in Dundee; the Mental Health Foundation in London and Glasgow; Little Wing in Dundee; Mental Health in the UK in Edinburgh; and the National Phobics Society in Manchester. In addition, the GP and CPN service based in Lochinver, Assynt was invaluable in facilitating the rural mental health research. The Scottish Recovery Network and the National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being in Scotland have also been supportive. Kevin and Mike at Art Angel are especially thanked for the book cover photograph.

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The book is for Chris, and because of him.

Hester Parr

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