Coming here keeps me going’ - community space as an enabler of well-being, belonging and care

Fisher, Jenny,

1. Question/Problem Therapeutic landscapes are constructed and experienced in different ways (Dunkley, 2009). Conradson (2003) differentiates between therapeutic landscapes and therapeutic landscape experience. He argues that it is the interactions between people and the relationships within a space that provide the positive outcomes on well-being and sense of belonging rather than the space itself. Well-being and a sense of belonging are important in overcoming loneliness in later life and indeed at all stages of life (Boneham and Sixsmith, 2005; Bowlby, 2011; Wiles et al., 2009). Third places are ‘public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work’ (Oldenburg, 1999: 16) Research on third places has shown that social support and connecting with others has a positive impact on well-being and sense of belonging (Rosenbaum, 2006).

2. The Method
This paper draws on the findings of a part-time doctoral thesis undertaken at the Manchester Metropolitan University. The research explored the everyday experiences of women who attended community-based activities located in a church in an urban neighbourhood in the North West of England. The ethnographic research included participant observations and informal discussions with women at three social activities (or mini-ethnographies, O'Reilly(2008)); a prayer group, a playgroup and an older people's group. The literature review considered concepts of community, the everyday and the third place. It also explored literature on well-being, sense of belonging and social participation. Ethnography is a process of learning from people (in this research, women) about their lives and weaving a story. The stories evolved during a two-year period in which the researcher participated in each of the three activities over a total of nine months. This presentation will consider some of the data from the playgroup and the older people’s group.

3. Policy Implications
The UK Census data highlights an increasing ageing population and an increase in children under five (Census, 2012). This research focused on older people living in the North West of England and carers of children of pre-school age. Local authority spending on Sure Start centres is being significantly reduced (Williams, 2012) alongside a reduction in funding for community based activities (Hastings et al., 2012). The Big Society is a central tenet of the neo-liberal Conservative-led coalition government and focuses on active communities and devolving power to the local level (Hancock et al., 2012). Butler (2012) suggests that the Big Society is a cover for the cuts in government spending. The ethnographic fieldwork for this research took place during the New Labour government and it has been analysed in the course of a coalition government. The research highlighted the valuable role played by volunteers within a community setting that is not captured in government data and exists ‘below the radar’ (McCabe, 2010).

4. The Findings
The affordance of a community space within a locality emerged as the central finding of the research. The findings suggest that the church setting provided a therapeutic landscape experience (Conradson, 2003) and could be theorised as ‘taskscape’ (Ingold, 2000).
