

Sunken or Buoyed? A Phenomenological Study of flooding and mobility in Osney Island, Oxford

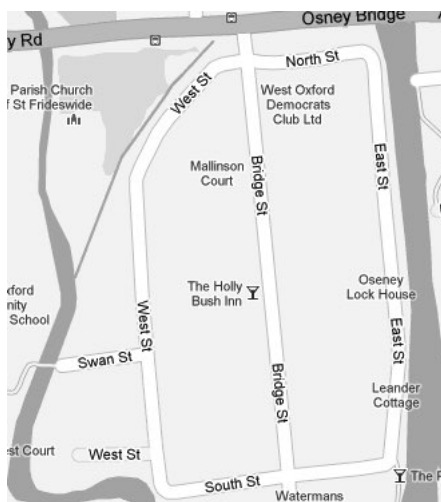
A Human Geography Fieldwork Report

Introduction

This paper explores the relative mobilities of elderly people during and after flooding in Osney Island, a distinct urban locality of west Oxford. 'Mobility' in this context refers to a capacity for movement both in the physical (i.e walking) and psychological (i.e communicating) sense. In particular, this paper explores the subjectivities of the individual, such as feelings of safety/strandedness and inclusion/exclusion within the post-flood community. Exploring the affective environment of flooding is an established yet relatively nascent field of urban geographical research. Through mapping the vernacular landscape and the visceral experiences of its inhabitants, my research thus attempts to produce a phenomenology of flooding. The elderly and young are perceived to be at greater risk from flooding due to their often reduced physical mobility. The overarching aims of this report occur in two parts: (i) To establish whether the elderly residents of Osney Island had pre-existing anxieties of becoming stranded/immobile before the flooding of 2007; and (ii) To explore whether the local community served to actively reduce these anxieties. Our research thus engages in an open and speculative question - do fears of 'being stranded' necessarily translate into an actual, physical and psychological strandedness - before gradually spreading out, much like the floodwaters, to occupy a space of multiple curiosities. The main inquiry and subquestions are thus as follows:

- Did elderly residents have any pre-existing anxieties of becoming stranded/immobile before the flooding of 2007?
- Did the local community play an active role in reducing these anxieties, particularly in the aftermath of the floods?
- Do flood defence schemes - co-produced by local and expert knowledge - alter the emotional experience of flooding?
- Are there temporal dimensions to post-flood support networks? Is there a strong, continuous sense of 'community'?

The qualitative findings that follow hope to offer extension upon the existing literature into post-flood phenomenologies. As the government's Pitt Review - published in the wake of the 2007 floods - concludes: 'the monitoring of the impact of flooding on the health and wellbeing of people, and actions to mitigate and manage the effects, should form a systematic part of the work of Recovery Coordinating Groups.' This paper thus attempts to add to the current flood management discourse. Research design and methodology was largely informed by a report published



by the Health Protection Agency in December, 2011. In *The Effects of Flooding on Mental Health*, the authors establish that ‘flooding can have profound effects on people’s welfare, employment, mobility, wellbeing, psychosocial resilience, relationships and mental health’ (HPA, 2011). Furthermore the report suggests that contact with the floodwaters - both corporeally (being evacuated) and materially in terms of property - leads to an increase in mental health symptoms and psychological distress. The primary exploration of this paper into the subterranean links between a fear of ‘being-stranded’ and the supposed actuality of ‘feeling-stranded’ thus draws inspiration from these HPA findings. Actively participating in these people’s experience of flooding further engages with a structural discourse that places the behaviour of the individual as one ‘determined not so much by their personal characteristics but by their position in the social structure, together with their associated resources, constraints or rules’ (Sayer, 1992; 1993 cited in Latham et. al, 2009). In this sense, my research of Osney Island probes at how property - an immobile ‘constraint’ - couples with the often reduced, physical mobility of the elderly to mediate their emotional experience of the flood.

Osney Island is a tight-knit community. This is noticeable from simply reading the Island’s monthly newsletter; ‘there are at least 3 blocked road drains that are in areas prone to flooding first...lower Bridge Street (towards Hatty’s house) and at the top of West Street by Don’s house’ (Residents’ Association Newsletter, Jan. 2013) The local Oxford Flood Alliance group often produces a brief column concerning ‘flood worries’ and any recent defence schemes undertaken collaboratively with the Environment Agency. My research into the ‘flood worries’ of the elderly thus naturally led to further exploration of the outcomes of these ‘co-produced’ flood schemes. In particular, the semi-structured interview with Simon Collings (Osney Island, OFA) was used to probe how local/everyday and exotic/expert knowledges behave as a ‘Competency Group’ in reducing flood anxieties (Landström C et. al, 2011). Curiosity into the temporal aspects of mobility - as stated in the last subquestion - was stoked by the HPA’s findings that a ‘so-called Recovery Gap’ exists in the aftermath of flooding. This ‘recovery gap’ describes the ‘period after which the emergency response arrangements have ended and individuals must rely on the private sector...for continued recovery efforts.’ As the authors further posit, this “limboland” period of waning formal support often places ‘unusual pressure on individuals and communities’, particularly those individuals living within the confines of pre-existing marginalities such as the elderly.



Were there ever fears of being stranded/ cut off by flooding?

‘Everyone’s very close around here. In 2007, I remember everyone lining the front gardens with sandbags, then we all went and waited to my neighbour’s house. But no, I didn’t fear as such for myself, it was more for my cat and the carpet! (she laughs)

‘In 2007...yes yes I was living alone on Bridge Street...I remember hearing the rain overnight and being fairly worried. I’m a light sleeper which didn’t help matters.

‘Being cut off to the market in town [central Oxford] is a problem...the bridge over Botley road is often impassable other than for these big car types. I walk and so they say I can’t cross it.’

‘We’re an island, I suppose we’re permanently stranded, but yes to the shops...even the pub down the street is often made much more difficult...I tend to just bunker up indoors with a strong supply of tea and biscuits.

‘Not particularly, although it is quite upsetting when you can hear people nattering away outside and your bound to the indoors.

Methodology

Our project on Osney Island aimed at producing interpretive rather than legislative knowledge. Methodological flexibility and experimentation thus predominated in certain parts of the research. Primarily however, research was undertaken using pre-formulated questionnaires on passing-by members of the public. The pyramid structure of the

questionnaire - beginning on the short/factual and ending with the more in-depth/abstract - enabled us to build up a friendly and non-confrontational rapport with individuals. Given the time constraints of a single day, convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used wherein elderly passers-by were asked to briefly participate. Introducing ourselves and our research was done amicably, identities remaining private if asked to be so. These seemingly chance encounters were not entirely random, pervading a spatial logic in that samples were taken from each street of Osney. Questionnaires were supplemented by two longer and less structured interviews, one of which was pre-organised by telephone (Simon Collings) and the other by chance. Recording these interviews with consent - rather than actively taking notes - yielded a rich dialogue for retrospective coding and study. The unplanned interview consisted of 'talking while walking' with an elderly gentleman along the river at East Street before settling at a bench. Such 'conversation in place' (Anderson, 2004) somewhat vivified his recollection of the flood; our movement and subsequent stillness upon a bench - all awhile mere footsteps from the water's edge - seemingly re-enacting the fleeting sensations of mobility and immobility one might experience during and after a flood.

Experience of the Floods

Remarkably, several of the participants in our research remember fond childhoods, roaming in and out of the intimate belt-buckle shaped streets of Osney. One encounter in particular - with an elderly man who'd grown up and inherited the family home on Bridge Street - stands out. Sitting on a bench in East Street, Geoffrey recollects somewhat poetically the nervous few hours 'awaiting the waters' of 2007: 'there's a sound like apple barrels, rumbling in the cellar.' Indeed 'the damage [on the Island] is not so much done by overtopping water but by it coming through the ground at South and Bridge Street' (Simon Collings, OFA). Similar sentiments were expressed by several of the other participants; of floods experienced not as a deluge or sudden barrage of overflowing river water but as a gradual and 'creeping' phenomena. Many remarked how this could somewhat be seen as 'a blessing in disguise', enabling them 'to prep sandbags and move furniture upstairs.' That these floodwaters were gradual perhaps tells in the relaxed, almost calm recollections of Geoffrey. Indeed, many of Osney's elderly residents seemed to regard the flood as 'a way of life', as 'part and parcel of being an Islander.' In similar vein, any anxieties before the flood were often equated with nebulous worries rather than sudden, existential fears - of injury or loss of life for instance. Fears over damage to property and accessibility to local amenities predominated in many of our conversations (table 1). This latter point is significant, revealing that elderly residents often did experience reduced physical mobility in and about town during and after a flood event. Interestingly however, such shrunken physical mobility - being less able to 'walk to the shops or pub' - did not immediately equate to feelings of strandedness/loneliness. Rather, many expressed a strong sense of togetherness. Osney Island's open-door system seemed to actively buoy the elderly residents' psychological mobility, their sense of freeness and inclusion in the communicative sense.

In the days directly after the flood, Geoffrey had had 'several visits from neighbours with cups of tea and biscuits in trail.' In another case, an elderly lady spoke fondly of being able to communicate via Skype with relatives and 'tell them about the flooding.' Again, in this sense, the very real and experiential loss of physical mobility was somewhat lessened by having an outlet for positive and 'good-humoured' conversation. An independent report 'Flood, Vulnerability and Urban Resilience: a real-time study of local recovery following the floods of June 2007 in Hull'

supports these findings, stating ‘the importance of creating or using existing collective spaces in the aftermath of a project where people can come and talk without an agenda’ (Whittle et al., 2010).

Does the Oxford Flood Alliance make its presence strongly felt in the aftermath of flooding?

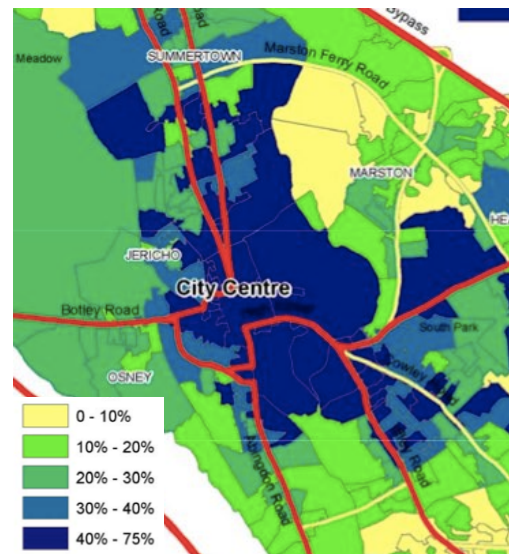
‘Yes, there’s a lot of help at hand before a flood...getting sandbags...most recently they’ve introduced temporary flood barriers at the bottom of West Street and East Street’.

‘There are constant flood updates which is good...pumps are used to help drain away stagnant water on West Street.’

‘There’s often a lot of firemen and volunteers from around Oxford. I think Simon Collings and the Alliance play a large part in them being there.’

‘They’re present all-year round...sending emails and holding meetings, the Alliance has a local feel...very attentive and open to ideas for improvement’

Population Turnover in Oxford, (Office for National Statistics, 2001) *Percentage moved in (left) Notice the low turnover of Osney Island (green) relative to central Oxford (dark blue) and its high turnover university accommodation*



A Sense of Community

There is a strong sense of community in Osney Island; an ‘amicable neighbourliness’ that sees ‘everyone do their bit in protect[ing] the streets from flooding.’ This is due in large part to the relatively low population turnover of Osney; the ‘everyone knows everyone phenomena’ as Geoffrey put it. However so, there is a certain flexibility within Osney’s young and middle-aged consort, wherein many leave - often ‘for work purposes’- and return intermittently in subsequent years. ‘Community’ was thus regarded by the participants in equally fluid terms. Being asked whether the Oxford Flood Alliance had a noticeable presence after the flood, many replied ‘yes’ animatedly. Furthermore they instantly calibrated the local group with the wider efforts of ‘emergency services and external volunteers.’ This indistinguishability is perhaps testimony to an effective system of co-producing and co-managing flood protection schemes. As Peter Rawcliffe says, the Oxford Flood Alliance focuses ‘on being cooperative, forward-looking’ and ‘building relationships and trust with authorities such as the Environment Agency, Thames Water and Thames Regional Flooding.’ Curiously however, he did say that ‘during flooding, the OFA aren’t generally involved’ as such but mainly act as a ‘port of mitigation for future flood events’; focusing on ‘risk reduction’ and ‘communicating on behalf of the community’ with Oxford City Council and DEFRA to attain capital for local flood mitigation schemes (Appendix B). For example, in March 2008, ‘funding for demountable barriers in ‘East Street and both ends of West Street’ were



attained. In 2011, Bridge street - where Geoffrey lives - was provided a '£76,500 grant from the City Council for individual property-level protection on the street, a scheme later extended to include homes in South Street' (OFA website). The physical presence of such 'demountable barriers' and 'people in [professional] high visibility jackets' resurrecting them have certainly reduced many of the elderly residents' anxieties. Many expressed a sense of 'being in good hands.' Quite paradoxically however, being reliant on these 'good [external] hands' for one's safety did not necessarily entail passivity. Instead, many viewed the 'barriers' as being of collective authorship, built by hands including theirs, and as such being symbols of 'local Osney resilience' embedded within the wider, city context. Indeed several participants had authored the scheme - Simon Collings and Geoffrey being two - through advising the 'Environment Agency' with their local expertise, such as: 'why Bridge Street, though seemingly the middle-ground, often floods first.' That local expertise is listened to and implemented by the Environment Agency further buoys the community. The existing literature suggests that communities often experience a 'recovery gap' once the floodwaters have receded and the clear-up begins.

'Recovery', as Whittle et. al propose, is often complex: 'Flood recovery is about rebuilding a sense of home which, for some, involves gaining more than they have lost, while for others, it involves the stress of learning to live in a new internal environment where memories have been stripped away. Recovery...also concerns the reshaping of the social and physical landscapes of the community as the web of allegiances shift throughout the recovery process; it involves a readjustment - rather than a return per se - to a new and altered set of circumstances'(Whittle et. al, 2010). Feelings of stress and displacement during the recovery were expressed by many of our Osney Island participants. Such stress often related to the 'stench of stagnant water' and the technicalities of 'sourcing alternative accommodation' or 'renewing insurance policies'. In terms of adjusting 'to [these] new and altered set of circumstances', the elderly residents of Osney were however remarkably resilient and flexible. Their emotional experience seemed somewhat positively mediated by having a local and vociferous group in place, 'able to raise contentious issues to the Environment Agency and Council'. In particular, the media was used as an outlet of public disaffection with the insurers in 2007 (right). Crucially, the presence of this formal link lessened the sense of a 'gap', even as neighbours returned to work and the familial tasks of 'taking the children to school' again re-emerged. As such, the natural waning of neighbourly 'informal' support was soon replaced by strong core of formal support provided by Alliance.

Conclusion

By engaging in conversation with Geoffrey, Simon and several other Osney Island residents, this paper progresses towards a mapping of the flood as both experiential and emotional phenomenon. In particular, our research stresses the importance of flexible, communal spaces wherein residents can support one another through friendly conversation and 'flood anecdotes over tea'. Remarkably, it seems that such small gestures and an 'open-door system' have the capacity to radically reduce feelings of physical isolation/strandedness in elderly, often less mobile residents. Understandably, Osney Island is a tight-knit community with a 'low population turnover' that facilitates this mode of recovery. Nevertheless, our research has clear policy implications in further stressing the physical and symbolic importance of local flood agencies, such as the Oxford Flood Alliance. The elderly residents' often equated the positive, external efforts of emergency services and Environment Agency staff/volunteers instantaneously with this internal, local agency. The strong ties between local and expert knowledge - a 'Competency Group' model (Landström C et. al, 2011) - thus

seemed to provide a greater sense of protection, autonomy and self-confidence in the elderly residents, both before and after the floodwaters. Finally, this paper stresses how a study of mobility, both during and after a flood, can no longer be viewed at the basic binary between movement and stillness. 'Mobility', and the implicit subjectivities it enshrines, are much more complex.

Bibliography

Anderson, J (2004) 'Talking whilst walking: a geographical archaeology of knowledge' *Area* 36.3, 254–261 Health Protection Agency, 2011 *The Effects of Flooding on Mental Health*

Landström C, Whatmore S J, Lane S N, Odoni N A, Ward N, Bradley S, 2011, "Coproducing flood risk knowledge: redistributing expertise in critical 'participatory modelling'" *Environment and Planning A* 43(7) 1617 – 1633

OFA (2012) Oxford Flood Alliance [Online] Available from: <http://www.oxfordfloodalliance.org.uk> [Accessed: 11th March 2013]

Osney Island Residents' Association Newsletter, Jan/Feb. 2013 [Online] Available from: <http://www.osneyisland.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Osney-Newsletter-jan2013.pdf> [Accessed: various times throughout March, 2013]

Sayer, 1992; 1993 cited in Latham et. al, 2009 *Key Concepts in Urban Geography*. London: SAGE Publications

Whittle et al. (2010) *After the Rain – learning the lessons from flood recovery in Hull*, final project report for „Flood, Vulnerability and Urban Resilience: a real-time study of local recovery following the floods of June 2007 in Hull“, Lancaster University, Lancaster UK

Appendix - Pre-Formulated Questionnaire

Individual Experience

- Have you ever been in Osney Island during a flood event?
- Were you directly affected by the floodwaters?
- Are there areas more adversely damaged /affected than others?

Pre-Flood Anxieties

- Were there ever fears of being stranded/cut off by flooding?
- Was it a sudden or gradual build up to the floods?
- Do you feel there was adequate support (such as flood defence and water level updates) provided?

Post-Flood Realities

- Did the flooding affect your ability to walk around town, access shops/ work etc. ?
- Was there a strong and discernible sense of community and camaraderie in the aftermath of flooding?
- Does the local Oxford Flood Alliance make its presence felt?

- Do you see many Environment Agency workers and volunteers offering help?

Perceptions on the Flood Defence Schemes

- Is there the sense of a very active, day-to day running of flood surveillance?
- How long have you lived on Osney Island?
- Do you think the recent flood defence schemes - such as the flexible barriers on East Street - have reduced your anxieties about being flooded?
- Have you given any personal input into the schemes undertaken?
- Do you think more could be done in aiding the protection of properties?

Perceptions of the 'Recovery Gap'

- Once the floodwaters have receded, is there ever a sense of isolation?
- Do you think the Flood Alliance and Environment Agency do enough in helping people with damaged property?
- Have you had any personal experiences with the insurance agencies?