Excluded from streets and spaces?

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Abstract

Social exclusion has developed as a term to refer to individuals within society who are excluded due to poverty or other economic factors. This paper discusses the fact that of the under-represented user of urban open spaces _ women, people from an ethnic minority background, disabled people, older people and younger people _ young people, and in particular teenagers are often perceived of as a problem in the urban context. This is particularly the case for skateboarders. In the USA skateboarders are increasingly being banned from city centres which have not been designed or are not managed for them _ they are increasingly being expected to skate in purpose built skate parks. This trend has spread to the UK where, particularly in some of the northern towns, skateboarding as an activity is being outlawed. Over a 13 year period skateboarders in the City of Sheffield, in particular, have been moved on from one favourite location to another. Does the skateboard provided for them satisfy their needs and make them feel socially included or not?

Initially the term ‘social exclusion’ was used in France to describe people ‘who had slipped through the social insurance system, with the result that they were being ‘administratively excluded by the state’ (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud, 1999). As the term ‘social exclusion’ was adopted across the European continent during the late 1990’s it was increasingly used to describe people at an economic disadvantage and

particularly those living in poverty. Many different definitions have been discussed, coupled with a debate about the complexity of a broader definition of social exclusion to include more than poverty. Thus for example Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud (1999) suggest that there is no one distinct group of people who are 'socially excluded', rather that individuals may be excluded in one of five dimensions. These dimensions are described as being consumption, savings, production, political and social. People may experience one or more than one of these dimensions and thus be socially excluded. However, this discussion is still somewhat dominated by economic factors, if not by poverty alone and a three point approach which begins Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud's (1999) discussion is, perhaps, more helpful in developing a fuller understanding of a definition of social exclusion. This suggestion is that:

> *'an individual is socially excluded if*
> *(a) they are geographically resident in a society but*
> *(b) for reasons beyond their own control cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society and*
> *(c) they would like to participate'.*

Acknowledging that many people are excluded from a variety of activities, the government of the United Kingdom set up a Social Exclusion Unit in 1997 with the aim of initiating a cross departmental approach to the reduction of social exclusion. This was one of the many projects declared, by the New Labour government, at the time to be about 'joined up thinking'. Again it is clear that politically the issue of social exclusion was, and is, still considered to relate mainly to economic issues as indicated by the government's web site:

> 'Social exclusion is a shorthand term that for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'.
> (Social exclusion web site, 2002)

Viability of urban centres

Towns and cities are ever changing in their social, economic and political nature. In particular physical changes have taken place with the growth of suburbs, expansion of core areas in the pre-war period and reconstruction in the post war years (Kunzman and Wegener, 1991). The viability and vitality of town and city centres in particular has been an issue during the last twenty years, both in the USA and in the UK. Retail threats to

these centres have included out of town shopping centres, retail parks, factory shops, catalogue shopping and more recently on-line shopping. Coupled with the congestion that many urban areas face this has resulted in the loss not only of economic prosperity to some city centres, viability, but also to the vitality that the presence of people gives to these centres (Department of the Environment, 1994 and DTZ Debenham Thorpe, 1995).

During the 1990's concern about the overall decline of many city centres in the United Kingdom was expressed through a variety of ways. The Association of Town Centre Management, launched in 1991, has brought together a wide range of stakeholders including retailers, financial bodies, local authorities and police. This movement has developed good practice in town centre management, pioneered the development of viable partnerships and continues to successfully campaign for related issues to government. The House of Commons Environment Committee (1994) put forward a series of recommendations to 'strengthen the position of town centres as attractive and viable shopping locations'. Research into the subject of town centres has also developed during these recent years with the first major output being the work undertaken by URBED for the Department of the Environment. This sought to identify methods of stopping the downward spiral of decline in our cities, together with suggestions for attempting to return the vitality and viability to our urban centres (Department of the Environment, 1994).

The changing nature of the Central Business District (CBD) itself, the core of towns and cities, has been described by a range of authors as being affected by functional, economic, technological and political forces (Ford, 1994) and as having different stages of inception, exclusion, segregation, extension, replication and readjustment and redevelopment (Vance, 1966). Many town and city centres, including their CBDs are currently being regenerated and some are now taking the issue of the importance of the presence of people, and not just their money, into account.

Vitality of urban centers

The success of urban areas and particularly the CBD has for some considered to only relate to the economic activities that take place. Despite this the presence of people and the activities that they undertake is the heart of the vitality of a city centre – in fact

without the vitality, or people, there would be no viability, or economics. Historically people have used the urban core for markets, fairs, religious events and festivals with activities such as bull fighting, fire eating and acrobatics (Girouard, 1985).

Yet for many years the CBD has been seen and perceived as purely for business and therefore an economic entity with no thought being given to the social role or importance of the area. However there are a few who have tried to develop an understanding of the use and meanings that the CBD hold for ordinary people. Among the most notable was Whyte (1973) who, in America, studied how people use plazas in their town centers, observing that most of the activities are passive ones of watching and chatting. In addition Gehl (1996) is renowned for his work undertaken in Scandinavia where he identified that different types of activities can take place. These are identified as necessary, optional and social activities and it is these which add life and vitality to our urban spaces. These necessary and optional activities increasing lead in to social activities where people encounter each other and have, or make, time to spend with each other.

One other development during the last ten years there has been an attempt to bring vitality back into many town and city centres by developing strategies for the '24 hour city'. In many locations this has been accompanied by a desire to return to having more people living in the city centre and thus an increased availability of residential accommodation.

Young people in particular have been shown to be regular and frequent users of town and city centers in the United Kingdom. They contribute significantly to both the vitality and viability of these centres, yet the enjoyment of this use is dampened by the fact that often they feel excluded from facilities or feel that they are treated suspiciously in some locations and by some adults (Woolley et al 1999a and Woolley et al 1999b).

Social exclusion in urban open spaces

Open spaces in urban areas, which allow for public use, whoever owns them, are some of the most democratic spaces that exist (Worpole and Greenhalgh, 1996). They provide opportunities for a wide range of activities and benefits relating to many different areas of life: social, environmental, physical and mental health and economic (Dunnett,

Swanwick and Woolley, 2002 and Woolley, 2003). Such benefits clearly enhance the quality of life of the increasing millions of people who live in urban areas. To realise the full potential of these benefits people need to be able to access and use them when and how they want. Not to be able to use such spaces in a way an individual would like to could be defined as social exclusion, following the argument of Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud's (1999) that someone should be geographically resident, want to participate in an activity and be prevented from doing so through no fault of their own.

Under-represented users, socially excluded people, of urban parks and green spaces have been shown to include women, disabled people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, older people and younger people (Comedia and Demos, 1995 and Dunnett, Swanwick and Woolley, 2002). A limited understanding of the use that some of these under-re presented user groups make of urban open spaces has been developing over a period of years. People from ethnic minority backgrounds have been identified as having specific patterns of use of parks in Chicago (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995) while issues and problems associated with the use of urban open spaces by disabled people have only recently begun to be addressed (Price and Stoneham, 2001, Dunnett, Swanwick and Woolley, 2002 and Woolley, 2002.) Of the under-represented user groups young people, often teenagers, are the ones who are often perceived as 'a problem' by the activities that they might participate in or even purely by their presence in a particular location.

Urban Youth

The teenage years are an important, sometimes difficult, period of an individual's emotional and physical development with growing independence from parents. At this age young people seek to establish their self-identity through opinions, values, looks and preferences choosing musical styles, dress codes and leisure activities as the building blocks of a self-identity. This has a direct relationship with their choice of social group and the way in which young people spend their free time (Childress, 1999).

During the last thirty years there has been a developing research interest in young people and their relationship with the urban environment. Lynch (1977), Ward (1978) and Hart (1979) were pioneering in their approach of observing the real experiences of young people in the city. Lynch studied small groups of young people in diverse cities,

in an attempt to discover how they used and valued their environment and identified the importance of urban space as a vital resource in the development from adolescence to adulthood. Hart looked more closely at young peoples' spatial awareness through a study of children in a small American town, and provided rare insights into the intricacy in which the urban environment is woven into the lives of young people. Ward carried out research in Britain to produce a qualitative record of children's experiences and explorations in the urban environment through education and play. A programme of research investigating how teenagers inhabit their local environment has been carried out in America over a period of fifteen years (Owens, 1988). This work identified a range of outdoor spaces which teens value which were mainly in 'natural landscapes' rather than urban spaces, while clearly identifying that teenagers value places to gather in and claim as their own, to hang about in or 'chill out' in.

Politics of urban open space - young people excluded?

The CBD has specifically been identified as having opportunities for significantly different activities for young people than those which take place in their local neighbourhood area (White, 1993), with the CBD having a much higher potential for social interaction and associated activity. More recently Woolley et al (1999a, 1999b) have identified that young people aged 11-18 are frequent users of their town and city centres making significant economic and social contributions to them. It is clear from this work that young people are often drawn to the city centre by factors other than consumption, such as social interaction and that they enjoy green and open spaces in the urban fabric.

The regeneration of some urban cores in America has resulted in the development of spaces that presume to be public, though in reality this 'publicness' is questionable (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998). Some of these redesigned spaces are considered to belong only to the white-collar workers who spend their daily working hours in the buildings surrounding the spaces. Skateboarders are one of the groups of non white-collar workers who enjoy using some of these spaces, but their experience has been considered to be similar to that of the homeless (Borden, 1998a). Both groups occupy urban space without engaging in economic activity, which annoys building owners and managers. Businessmen do not want skateboarders interfering with their customers and so teenagers are only accepted when they are spending money;

> "Where the homeless are ejected from business and retail areas by such measures like curved bus benches, window ledge spikes and doorway sprinkler systems, so skaters encounter similar treatment. Managers have added rough textured surfaces to discourage skaters, while more overt measures include spikes and bumps added to handrails, blocks of concrete placed at the foot of banks, chains across ditches and steps, and new, unridable surfaces such as gravel and sand."(Borden, 1998a)

Los Angeles is one of the cities where the built form and authoritative impositions of the city are challenged by some who seek to undertake activities that have not been purposely planned or designed into the fabric of the CBD. The office tower blocks, luxury hotels and corporately rented residential suites, together with the private plazas, assisted by public finance, creates a setting for the approved mix of users of employees and residents. The 'bubble man' and the skateboarders are not seen as desirable entities by the authorities but both find cracks in the urban and social fabric that enables them to enjoy their skills, while sometimes providing entertainment for others, despite the urban design, municipal law and private policy seeking to exclude them (Flusty, 1999).

Exclusion by regulation

Public space is often designed by and presumed to be for the use of adults - it is often not a space where teenagers can freely participate in street life or define their own ways of interacting or using the space. Indeed open space is highly regulated or closed and is where young people are expected to show deference to adults and adults' definitions of appropriate behaviour (Valentine, 1996). But not only is the design of these spaces not directed at or include young people but increasingly the management of these spaces also excludes young people and the uses that they might like to make of such spaces.

In the USA ordinances have been initiated that enable communities to designate areas where teenagers are not allowed to hang out. There also appears to have been a rise of curfew laws and an increase in skateboard prohibitions in USA (Owens, 1999). In addition certain groups of young people are defined as 'problems', in America, simply because they choose not to recreate in specifically allocated spaces such as skate parks (Childress, 1999) but prefer the 'natural terrain' (Thompson, 1998) to be found in many town and city centre locations. Indeed, in America, skateboarding appears to have been effectively outlawed in the wider urban environment and contained within

purpose built skate parks (Owens, 2001). This could be seen as part of the '*hidden programme*' of youth recreation (Childress, 1999). In the UK skateboarding is sometimes perceived as a 'social incivility' or a 'public disorder or nuisance' because of the possibility that the activity might make others feel anxious or apprehensive to be in a particular place (Oc and Tiesdell, 1997).

The exclusion of skateboarders from their natural terrain in urban cores has also begun to be implemented in towns and cities in the UK, particularly in the north of England. Manchester City Council banned skateboarding from various public spaces, including outside the Town Hall, in 1997 (Press, 1997). This had a major effect upon the way in which skaters inhabit spaces in the city.

> "The grounds that they have for this are that skating is classed as a dangerous sport and as such could cause injury to any passers by. Apparently at the moment the pigs (police) are giving verbal warnings, if they catch you a second time you get an official warning (i.e. it goes on your record) after that they reckon they'll take you to court and you'll get a substantial fine." (Butler, 1997).

There has not been an opportunity to observe the scene or interview any skateboarders in Manchester since the most recent redevelopment of Manchester, City Centre, following the IRA bombing.

Bradford and Leeds have also banned skateboarding from outside specific buildings or from particular urban spaces but one skateboarder commented:

> 'they have tried to stop us skateboarding before but it made no difference then, and it will make no difference now. What are they going to do? Lock us all up?' (Wilson, 1997)

The skateboarders of Cardiff have also been effectively banned from the city centre by a bye-law that bans skateboarding from a one-mile radius around the centre of the city and makes major public spaces within the centre a 'bust', that is, skaters will be fined, or even end up in court for skating there.

> "…like Central Square – you get thrown off by security just for looking as if you're thinking of skating…" (Woolley and Johns, 2001)

The Cardiff skateboarders had been moved on from their previous favourite city centre skate spot. This had been behind the National Museum, but skaters were constantly moved on by security staff*, "….they used to always be hassling us…."*. This conflict led to the space being redesigned incorporating materials that were impossible to skate, such as loose gravel and rough textured concrete paving blocks. In this way the museum managed to stop skateboarders using the landscape around the building, but in doing so made no effort to engage with the skateboarders and work with them to find a solution. Consequently, the skaters were excluded from this space, but they soon found another space to adopt, only a couple of hundred metres from their previous main spot, as was the case in Sheffield.

Exclusion by fear

This restriction by regulation is compounded by the educational stance of 'stranger-danger', supported by the press, media and schools, which instils in young people fear of people they do not know in public spaces. This fear is misplaced due to the fact that more young people are harmed in their homes, not in public spaces, and by people they know, not by strangers (Valentine, 1996). However it is possible that such fear surrounds younger children's use of open spaces, more than teenagers and often this type of fear is greater concern for parents than for the young people themselves. Indeed perhaps the greater fear for teenagers is the fact that they are often perceived by adults to be up to no good.

This lack of trust, or fear in the urban realm has also been tempered with the fact that many young people admit going to urban parks to get away from the busy and public nature of home life in order to experience the freedom of a park (Worpole,1997). This issue of fear and trust has been further discussed with respect to children and young people needing to have trust in the city - in the street, in peers, in parents, in strangers and in traffic in order that they might fully use and enjoy urban open spaces (Woolley, Gathorne-Hardy and Stringfellow, (2001).

Sheffield – city of sport but not of skate?

For about 12 years the city of Sheffield has been marketed as 'the city of sport' by its politicians – particularly by the ruling Labour group. This claim has been justified by the development of many world quality facilities which were built for the World Student

Games, which were held in the city in 1991. Skateboarders, however have felt very aggrieved that the city of sport has not adequately recognized them as a sport and provided a facility or continued to allow them to use some of their natural terrain in the city centre.

Exclusion from Sheffield city center for the skateboarders began when Sheffield Hallam University objected to one space, an entrance to one of its sites and opposite the railway station, being used. Hallam University Square was the most popular place in Sheffield to meet up and skate. However, the university did not like skateboarders using it and security staff always moved skaters on. Eventually the space was re-modeled to make it 'skate-proof'. This included altering the surface and putting steps on the wall parapets. The skateboarders moved across the road to a location even closer to the city centre – Tudor Square. This proved to be a very popular location and the use of this square by skateboarders was one of the prompts for our initial research (Woolley and Johns, 2001) - the other main prompt being the fact that several landscape students in one particular academic year arrived at site visits for project work on skateboards.

The case of skateboarders has not been helped by the media coverage in Sheffield. Skateboarders have been said to be:

> "...causing havoc in Sheffield's Tudor Square..." (Sheffield Star, 9-10-97)

and have even been named as,

> "...public enemy number one..." (Sheffield Star).

But the importance of Tudor Square to the skaters was described thus:,

> "(it's the) main hookup spot but no one knows why. It's not that good to skate, but you don't really get any hassle there. There's blocks, a gap, a grindy wall, some little manual roll things and a set of 9 stairs. If you're visiting Sheffield this would probably be a good first spot to hit and hook up with locals. Everyone usually meets up there weekends at around 2 and most weekdays at around 7.30" (Horseheads, 1999).

A multi million pound redevelopment of the city centre the 'Heart of the City' project has included the redesign and development of the Peace Gardens, the construction of the

Millennium Galleries, improvements to the links between the railway station and the city centre and is awaiting the construction of a hotel. The authorities were very concerned that the high quality fabric of the redesigned external spaces might be damaged by skateboarders and so a bye law was introduced to cover the heart of the city project, which includes Tudor Square as well as the Peace Gardens. Thus the skateboarders were again excluded from their favourite natural terrain.

Why was Tudor Square so popular?

A questionnaire that Sheffield City Council undertook with 200 skateboarders identified that skateboarders in Sheffield are predominantly male and aged between 11 and 22 with more than half of them being school pupils and almost a quarter being students at college or university. Almost one third had been skating for two or more years, with over a third skating for one to two years and a third skating for a year or less. Almost three quarters of the skateboarders participate in their sport three or more times a week with nearly ninety per cent participating twice or more a week (Sheffield City Council and Words and Pictures, 1998).

Yet why Tudor Square was so popular was still an unanswered question by this quantitative work. So qualitative work was undertaken in the summer of 1998 in the form of focus group discussions with skaters of Tudor Square. These semi-structured discussions enabled the interviewees to feel 'strength of numbers' while at the same time allowing the interviewer to study the dynamics of the group (May, 1997). Similar discussions with skateboarders in Manchester and Cardiff city centers were undertaken in the summer of 1999. These discussions revealed four main reasons why Tudor Square and the city centre spaces in Manchester and Cardiff were popular with skateboarders. These four criteria are identified as *accessibility*, *trickabiity*, *sociability* and *compatibility* (Woolley and Johns, 2001). Accessibility relates to the fact that the chosen skating spot is centrally located, easy to get to and is well known. Trickability is an expression of the character of the space as being good for doing different tricks. This means that certain elements exist within the landscape of the space – these may be include steps, walls and hand rails. For some skaters the trickability was the main reason for the choice of location. Sociability means that a space is '*where everyone meets up*'. People know that there will be like minded others there to meet with, chill out with and skate with. Indeed others will go to the spaces just to watch and be there.

Compatibility refers to the fact that the use of a space for skateboarding is compatible with other potential users. Lack of compatibility is often not a fact but an issue to do with perception of different users, such as theatre goers in Sheffield perceiving that the skaters of Tudor Square were a problem but similarly the skaters also feeling threatened by evening 'townies' (Woolley and Johns, 2001).

Exclusion from the street

The exclusion of skateboarders from streets by the introduction of bye-laws has in many instances in the USA resulted in the provision of skate parks in suburban areas (Owens, 2001). A study of the implications of the introduction of bye-laws in the UK has not been undertaken but it is possible to learn a little from the ongoing experience of Sheffield. At the time that it became obvious that bye-laws would be introduced in the city centre to prevent skateboarding the skaters and some of their mothers became concerned about this possible exclusion. Various sites were discussed in the media as possible locations for skateboard parks and many hopes were raised. In the end a site, formerly used as a kick pitch and with some evening lighting, was provided by the city council. The site is conveniently located adjacent to a skate shop in one of the up and coming parts of the edge of the city centre and is surrounded by a green space on one side, shops and city centre doctors surgery on one side and housing on the other third side. The site backs onto some small industrial units. The redevelopment of the site into a skateboard park cost about £100,000 with money coming from nine different sources. Use of the skateboard park commenced in September 2000.

Six months after the skate park was opened observations and a questionnaire were undertaken, by colleagues in the Department of Psychology, with 136 users of the park to develop an understanding of their opinions of the park and its facilities and affordances. It was clear that the level of use was high, on the opening day there were still 100 skaters by the end of the afternoon. The questionnaires revealed that the site met the criteria of accessibility and sociability, with the skateboarders mainly skating through the city to the site. Most of the local skaters regularly used the site and it had become a reliable place to find other skaters, in a safe atmosphere. The trickability of the site had been aided by one of the skaters, who manages the adjacent shop, being involved in the design of the skate park. He had taken the opportunity to build in features that the streets could not provide. The new site is clearly compatible with the

surrounding uses of the open space and associated housing and retailing opportunities. This facility has indeed become a focal point for the skateboarders activities within the city centre. (Payne and Spencer, unpublished).

So, as in many other urban locations, the skateboarders of Sheffield have, over a period of more than 13 years repeatedly been excluded from some of their favourite locations in the city centre. This exclusion has not been due to poverty or economic considerations but due to the perception of skateboarders as a nuisance and concern for damage to the urban fabric. However, it does appear from the initial follow up work undertaken by Payne and Spencer that the skate park that has been provided was, initially at least, satisfying some of the needs of the skaters.

It would now be very exciting to follow these previous studies with a study some years into the use of the skate park. A new study could investigate whether the skaters are still happy with the skate park, whether any of them still try or would like to still skate in Tudor Square and identify where else they skate – especially in the city centre. In addition an understanding of other people's current perception of the skateboarders could be developed by interviewing other users of the open space, local residents, shop owners and staff and patients from the doctor's surgery. The site has been so successful that other wheeled activities are also taking place and one question to ask of the skateboarders would be whether there are now times when they feel excluded by the BMXers. Is skateboarding and BMXing compatible?

All of this would help to understand whether Sheffield skateboarders now feel excluded or whether they feel included, not economically, but in a true social sense, within the core of the city. Of course it would then be most valuable to extend such a study to the other towns already studied and then move on to a sample of non-metropolitan towns including market towns, ports and coastal resorts, where skateboarding is also known to be an issue. Overall this would help to build up a picture of whether skateboarders in the UK feel socially excluded or not.

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