

# **Space and place as constraints and resources in women's strategies to escape domestic violence**

Janet Bowstead

*Faculty of Applied Social Sciences*

j.bowstead@londonmet.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the early stages of a PhD research project on women's journeys in response to domestic violence, focusing on women's use of space as a strategy for safety. In this paper, aspects of conceptual thinking on space and place are outlined, raising questions and developing tools for the analysis of the empirical data in the later stages of the project. Using the work of various philosophers and writers from a range of disciplines to rethink issues of location and relocation, of staying put and fleeing, enables an engagement with theory within what is also an empirically-grounded social sciences research project with implications for social policy and practice. This paper will particularly explore three examples of such thinking about women's spatial strategies: Foucault's concepts of the spatiality of surveillance are used in understanding space as a constraint and appreciating what women are overcoming when they leave abusive relationships; Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomic networks and lines of flight are used in understanding space as a resource on the journeys themselves; and Augé's concepts of non-places are used in understanding space as place, and recognising what needs to be counteracted to create new homes and a sense of belonging.

## **Introduction**

Within the research and practice literature on women's experiences of domestic violence, leaving the abusive relationship is frequently recognised as a strategy to achieve safety (see for example, Dobash & Dobash 1980; Binney et al. 1981; Davies et al. 1998; Humphreys & Thiara 2002; Stark 2007). However, notions of 'moving on' or

'journey' tend to be used as metaphors, rather than as considerations of geographical journeys; and 'leaving' is often conceptualised as an event, rather than as a complex process over time and space. This research project focuses on women's use of space as a strategy for safety, analysing their literal journeys to leave violence and access support services, and relates these journeys to demographic characteristics of women, and to characteristics of the places of origin and destination. In this paper on the early stages of the research, aspects of conceptual thinking on space and place are outlined, raising questions and developing tools for the analysis of the empirical data in the later stages of the project.

### **A theoretical engagement with space and place**

Using the work of various philosophers and writers from a range of disciplines to rethink issues of location and relocation, of staying put and fleeing enables an engagement with theory within what is also an empirically-grounded social sciences research project with implications for social policy and practice. Recognition of the operation of power in space enables consideration of space as both a constraint and a resource. As a constraint, space contributes to governing how individuals act, think and feel, and how societies operate, and as a resource it can be experienced, understood and used to facilitate or achieve specific social practices, including the processes of place-making in both the origins and the destinations of women's journeys. Concepts of space and place are therefore drawn on as tools, as recognised by Foucault: 'All my books are little tool boxes. If people want to open them, to use a particular sentence, a particular idea, a particular analysis like a screwdriver or spanner ... so much the better!' (Foucault 1995, p.720).

This paper will particularly explore three examples of such tools to think about women's spatial strategies: the ideas of Michel Foucault on 'Panopticism' to explore the spatiality of surveillance in abusive relationships; the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on 'Rhizome' to explore the spatiality of escaping such relationships; and the ideas of Marc Augé on 'Non-places' to explore the refuges to which women escape.

### **Panopticism – space as a constraint**

Foucault used the ideas behind Jeremy Bentham's late eighteenth century 'Panoptican' prison plan to highlight a structured system whereby 'space becomes specified and functional' (Foucault 1980b, p.149), enabling the easy and effective exercise of

*Space and place as constraints and resources in women's strategies to escape domestic violence*

disciplinary power. Each individual is isolated in a prison cell, unable to communicate, an object of hierarchical observation from the centre - able to be seen but not to see. Foucault argued that 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (Foucault 1991, p.201) because inmates internalise the gaze and regulate their own conduct. He argued that panoptic techniques –'a dominating, overseeing gaze'– thereby become combined and generalised into a circular, reinforcing, and highly efficient process (Foucault 1980b, p.155); describing it as 'a superb formula: power exercised continually and for what turns out to be minimal cost'. Whilst recognising the value of Foucault's argument that power can be non-violent except where it exceeds its legitimacy, MacCannell and MacCannell (1993) question his distinction between power and force, arguing that the gaze itself does not have power, but only to the extent that it is associated with actual violence, with the victim knowing that force will be applied where there is resistance.

Foucault's ideas have therefore been challenged by feminists who argue that domination is not simply a product of discourse, but that men are socially constructed as powerful, possessing as well as potentially exercising power. Ramazanoğlu argues that power is therefore not neutral - producing knowledge rather than repression - but that men have power, and their power is a form of domination backed by the threat of force (Ramazanoğlu 1993; Holland et al. 1998). However, in some of his writings, Foucault does acknowledge men's exercise of power over women, and emphasises that relations of power are interwoven with other relations, such as within the family, and that power is used strategically and tactically to achieve specific ends (Foucault 1980a).

The power of the possibility of surveillance to regulate behaviour, and its unpredictable operation to instil self-regulation, can be used conceptually in visualising abusive male power over female partners. An abusive man systematically uses threats, intimidation, and coercion to instil fear in his partner, and so these behaviours can be conceived as the spokes of a wheel, with physical and sexual violence holding it all together as the rim. The 'Power and Control Wheel' developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project n.d.) bears a resemblance to the 'Panopticon' as it outlines the range of abusive tactics that an abusive man can use over time and across space; including the use of isolation and formal and informal surveillance of his partner's

actions. The segments of the wheel parallel the cells of the 'Panoptican' - representing aspects of a woman's life and autonomy, such as home, confidence, work, study, relationships, children and family. The abusive man is able to exercise surveillance over each aspect simultaneously, because of the positioning of his power and control at the centre.

No aspect of the woman's life is her own, and in the same way as inmates in a Panoptican system, subjected to power and control, would come to regulate their own conduct, many women experiencing domestic violence internalise their partner's demands to act, dress, organise the household, work, and bring up children in a particular way. Holland et al (1998, p.11) term this the 'male-in-the-head', arguing that both men and women live under the normalising male gaze: 'We take the 'male-in-the-head' to indicate the surveillance power of this male-dominated and institutionalised heterosexuality'. This power may be resisted or challenged, though Foucault has been criticised for failing to discriminate sufficiently between resistance to power and actual ability to transform power relations (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 1993). It is through resistances, and specifically women's attempts to flee domestic violence, that the spatiality of women's lines of flight can be explored.

### **Rhizome – space as a resource (Deleuze & Guattari 1988)**

Deleuze and Guattari explore lines of flight within their notion of 'rhizome', which they compare with dendriform concepts and actions. They characterise rhizomes as open adventurous networks, forming ceaseless and unpredictable new connections in contrast to the linearity and inflexibility of roots, travelling along predictable routes. They argue that tree roots or branches grow out from a centre, whereas rhizomes grow opportunistically in all directions, starting up again after a rupture, and achieving deterritorialisation along lines of flight to connect with other multiplicities.

These 'rhizome' journeys or lines of flight can be related to women's journeys to flee domestic violence. Predictable routes (roots) are not just inflexible, they are dangerous because of the likelihood that they can be traced and followed by an abusive man aiming to re-assert control over a woman's mobility. Her perceptions of space are shaped by her capacity to move about (Ardener 1993), which is likely to be restricted as part of the

tactics of abuse; and if she plans her journey, her total everyday interaction with the man she is trying to escape increases the likelihood that her plans will be found out by him. MacCannell & MacCannell argue that 'the isolation of the victim increases as her social distance from the perpetrator and the scene of the crime decreases' (1993, p.209). They use Foucault's notion of capillary power (Foucault 1991), whereby power penetrates into even the smallest details and furthest extremities of life, to argue that such functioning of power is accompanied by capillary violence which can spread through networks of relationships. In contrast, rhizomic lines of flight are less likely to be anticipated and traced: if a woman can travel unpredictably in space, to unanticipated locations, she is less likely to be able to be followed. Women are escaping a regime of disciplinary power -an abuser who knows her contacts- so power does not simply weaken as a function of distance. If a woman travels to a known location, even a distant location, for example to family or friends, an abusive man will be easily able to trace her route, contact her, and attempt to re-establish control through techniques of power. By travelling to an unknown location and by making new connections, for example by using the network of women's refuges, a woman is more likely to be able to escape the operation of power over space.

### **Non-places – space as place (Augé 2008)**

Because of the risks of travelling to known places or to friends or family, many women fleeing domestic violence journey to women's refuges: supportive temporary accommodation whilst they consider their longer term options. Though refuges are conceived of as places of safety, they can also be explored using Augé's concept of 'non-places' (Augé 2008, p.63) whereby he argues that, 'if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place'. He associates 'non-places' with certain ends, such as transport, commerce and leisure, rather than a concern with location. For example, holiday-makers may be largely indifferent as to whether they travel from Gatwick, Heathrow or Stansted, and therefore airports become non-places.

Refuges can arguably be described as 'non-places' because a woman fleeing domestic violence may be initially indifferent as to where she goes, so long as it is a place her partner does not know, a place where she may

formally or informally change her identity and sever contact with friends and family to protect them from having to keep secrets. In all these ways she can be seen as arriving at a refuge without relationships (except that many will have children with them), a history, or a settled identity. At first, as she attempts to settle into the refuge, she may have little sense of where she is: she can only disclose her address as a Post Office Box number, and, whilst the building will have the functions of a house, such as bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom, it is likely to barely feel like a place of residence, let alone of dwelling, or a home.

However, Burman and Chantler (2004) argue that refuges can attempt to counteract their tendency to be 'non-places' and instead contribute to a sense of belonging through considerations of structural positioning, physical space and emotional space. They particularly consider the experiences of minoritised women and emphasise refuges' potential role in challenging structural positioning by tackling discrimination and racism. More widely, they use Augé's concept of 'non-places' to consider the potentially unwelcoming and unhomey feel of the institutional-type buildings of many refuges, and what can be done to improve women's experience of the physical space. In terms of emotional space, Augé characterises non-places as associated with interchange, rather than paths truly crossing, and as mere codes of communication, rather than of truly shared language. However, in refuges facilities are often shared, with shared activities provided for women and children, and Gedalof (2003) explores women's attempts to reproduce home and re-ground community in such temporary places of living. The emotional space of refuges can therefore be seen to enable them to become places of safety which bring women together collectively for support and to reduce isolation.

## **Conclusion**

The use of such conceptual 'tool boxes' from a range of disciplines can therefore provide insights to analyse women's spatial strategies in fleeing domestic violence, and will be used as such within the larger research project. They can be sensitising concepts to assist in identifying patterns and processes within the empirical data, and contextualising concepts to assist in analysing these patterns and generalising from the individual narratives of women's journeys.

Specifically, Foucault's concepts of the spatiality of surveillance are useful in understanding space as a constraint and appreciating what women are overcoming when they leave abusive relationships. Understanding that the functioning of disciplinary and capillary power can continue over distances also enables a recognition that leaving an abusive relationship is not an event but is a complex process over time and space. Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomic networks and lines of flight are useful in conceptualising the journeys of escape and understanding space as a resource on the journeys themselves. Understanding how the nature and (un)predictability of a woman's use of space can affect her likelihood of escaping the abusive operation of power will contribute to analysis of the journeys women make. Finally, Augé's concepts of non-places are useful in understanding space as place, and recognising what needs to be counteracted by individual women and children, as well as by support services, to establish safe places to live. Understanding what makes meaningful, relational places, and the connections with identity is important in considering both the nature of initial safe spaces for women and children (such as refuges), and the longer term creation of new homes and a sense of belonging.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research project is funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Studentship.

### **References**

- Ardener, S., (1993). Ground Rules and Social Maps for Women: An Introduction. In: *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (Revised edition), Oxford: Berg
- Augé, M., (2008). *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* – 2nd English-language edition, London and New York: Verso
- Binney, V., Harkell, G. & Nixon, J., (1981). *Leaving Violent Men: A Study of Refuges and Housing for Abused Women* (reprinted 1988), Bristol: WAFE
- Burman, E. & Chantler, K., (2004). *There's No-Place Like Home: Emotional Geographies of Researching "Race" and Refuge Provision in Britain.*

- Gender, Place & Culture, 11 (3), p. 375-397
- Davies, J., Lyon, E. & Monti-Catania, D., (1998). Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices, London: Sage
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F., (1988). Rhizome. In: A thousand plateaus. London: Athlone Press, p.3-25
- Dobash, R.E. & Dobash, R., (1980). Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy, London: Open Books
- Domestic Abuse Intervention Project Power and Control Wheel. Available from: <<http://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheelgallery.php>> [Accessed 6 February 2011]
- Foucault, M., (1991). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (Surveiller et Punir 1975 trans. Alan Sheridan 1977), London, Penguin
- Foucault, M., (1995). Dits et écrits 1954-88 vol. 2. D. Defert & F. Ewald eds. Paris, Gallimard.
- Foucault, M., (1980a). Power and Strategies. In: C. Gordon ed. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. London: Pearson Education, p.134-145
- Foucault, M., (1980b). The Eye of Power: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot. In: C. Gordon ed. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. London: Pearson Education, p.146-165
- Gedalof, I., (2003). Taking (a) Place: Female Embodiment and the Re-grounding of Community. In: S. Ahmed, C. Castañeda, A.-M. Fortier, & M. Sheller eds. Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration. Oxford and New York: Berg
- Holland, J., Ramazanoğlu, C., Sharpe, S. & Thomson, R., (1998). The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power, London: The Tufnell Press
- Humphreys, C. & Thiara, R., (2002). Routes to Safety: Protection Issues Facing Abused Women and Children and the Role of Outreach Services, Bristol: Women's Aid
- MacCannell, D. & MacCannell, J.F., (1993). Violence, Power and Pleasure: A Revisionist Reading of Foucault from the Victim Perspective. In: C. Ramazanoğlu ed. Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism. London and New York: Routledge
- Ramazanoğlu, C., (1993). Introduction. In: C. Ramazanoğlu ed. Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and

*Space and place as constraints and resources in women's strategies to escape  
domestic violence*

Feminism. London and New York: Routledge

Ramazanoğlu, C. & Holland, J., (1993). Women's Sexuality and Men's  
Appropriation of Desire. In: C. Ramazanoğlu ed. *Up Against Foucault:  
Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism.*  
London and New York: Routledge

Stark, E., (2007). *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal  
Life*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press

Copyright © Janet Bowstead 2011.

