Everyday life in a UK retirement village: representations and experiences

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The UK has experienced a growth in the number of purpose-built retirement communities in recent years. This study explores how aspects of everyday life such as health and well-being, daily routines, leisure activities and social relationships are connected with the environment at a purpose-built retirement village in Buckinghamshire, UK. Denham Garden Village (DGV) incorporates 326 mixed-tenure properties and a range of facilities including a gym, swimming pool, café bar and medical centre.

Challenge: Selecting residents to interview

Residents with different quality of life (QoL) scores were selected with the aim of identifying individuals who had a range of lifestyles, socio-demographic characteristics, expectations and experiences. Residents were split into categories according to their wave 1 and wave 2 CASP-19 QoL scores (available for 62 residents). Five residents in each category with scores at the most extreme ends of the scale, or whose scores had changed by the greatest amount, were invited to take part in interviews.

Twenty in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with residents who had been living in DGV for at least 3.5 years. Quantitative survey data from LARC (Longitudinal study of Ageing in a Retirement Community) are also analysed (wave 1, 2007: n=122; wave 2, 2009: n=156).

Challenge: Designing the interviews

A broad interpretation of ‘environment’ was used within a ‘facets of life’ approach (see Figure 1). Interviews were structured around categories such as ‘physical environment’ and ‘leisure activities’ with an overarching focus on residents’ expectations and experiences, and the extent to which these were specific to life in DGV.

The use of broad categories allowed discussions to be structured around specific topics while retaining flexibility to enable residents to talk about the experiences that were most important to them.

Challenge: Linking qualitative and quantitative data

Quantitative data were used to inform the selection of residents for qualitative interviews. Analysis of both types of data will enable a greater understanding of the relationship between everyday life and environment, by considering subjective experiences alongside more objective measures, and by exploring everyday life and environment as experiences and processes at individual, group and organisational levels.

Conclusion

There is a relatively small body of research on everyday life in UK retirement villages. Using a broad definition of ‘environment’ to examine everyday life in this context gives a more complete picture of how, and to what extent, residents’ lives are connected with the environment at DGV. The methodological challenges outlined above highlight the issues involved in exploring relationships between aspects of everyday life and dimensions of the environment.

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