Being in place: Citizenship in long-term mental healthcare
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DISCUSSION

Placing Citizenship

6.1 Introduction

This thesis deals with the citizenship of clients of long-term mental healthcare. I have discussed clients’ citizenship by analyzing stories derived from ethnographic fieldwork at a mental health centre and by examining literature from a specialist journal in the field of mental healthcare. In the prologue to this thesis, I introduced Maurice. Maurice is a long-term client with severe mental health problems who tried to participate in a people’s hearing: a forum-like setting that corresponds readily to our intuitive, commonplace understanding of what citizenship enactment entails. I felt that the way in which Maurice participated was not satisfactory and attributed this to the prevailing model of independent, autonomous citizenship that inspired the hearing. In the introduction, I stated that even though Maurice may not have satisfactorily participated in the hearing, it does not necessarily follow that he cannot successfully enact citizenship in other contexts. How, then, can we find new ways of thinking about citizenship that will include people like Maurice?

In order to develop new ways of thinking about citizenship for long-term mental health clients, I studied citizenship according to three themes: everyday practices, relationships and materiality. My main research questions were: How do long-term mental healthcare clients enact citizenship? And how does this affect concepts of citizenship? In this concluding chapter, I first describe my main research finding: a new notion of citizenship for long-term mental health clients, which I then further develop. According to this concept, citizenship of long-term mental health
clients can be conceived as the degree to which clients are in-place. The notion of 
being-in-place best captures all three themes I use to study citizenship: everyday 
practices, relationships and materiality. These themes are derived from my research 
methodology: Actor-Network Theory and its later development in the field of Science 
and Technology Studies. After discussing the notion of being-in-place, I discuss how it 
feeds back into Actor-Network Theory. In the last section of this chapter, I compare my 
notion of being-in-place to other approaches to citizenship in order to develop it yet 

6.2 Citizenship as Being-in-Place

The key proposition of this thesis is that ‘being-in-place’ is a good way of thinking 
about citizenship. To be a citizen is to be in-place in one’s human and material 
environment. Clients of long-term mental healthcare may come to be in-place by 
creating relationships of familiarity with their environments. In chapter five, I likened 
the idea of being-in-place to being in a sphere: being in an environment consisting of 
people and things that connect with a person’s identity. These spheres are constituted 
by relationships that provide shelter and allow people to develop. Being in-place means 
that there is little that causes distress due to unfamiliarity; clients can be at ease because 
they understand and can meaningfully react to what is going on. Being in-place thereby 
enables them to develop certain capabilities, like having relationships or enacting 
appreciations that they would not be able to in stressful, unfamiliar environments. 
What makes this citizenship notion an appealing one for long-term mental health 
clients – and possibly for other groups with disabilities – is that at its root is a basic 
condition for any person’s agency: being at ease in a human and material environment. 
In the introduction, I stated that because of their mental health problems, clients may 
find it difficult to participate in citizenship practices inspired by the values autonomy 
and independence. Independent living, for instance, has turned out to be an 
unattainable ideal for many clients. I would like to suggest that this is so because in 
these practices, long-term mental health clients do not experience one of the basic 
conditions for agency: they are not at ease in their human and material environment.
Consequently, in independent living situations, they fail to (satisfactorily) make a connection with what is going on around them.

So, from the perspective of being-in-place, problems may arise because clients living independently are confronted with (too many) environments and situations with which they cannot relate. However, being-in-place is not to be considered a static situation. The spherical, relational aspect of my notion of being-in-place allows clients to establish relationships with new people and things while moving to new locations, and thereby re-establish a situation of being-in-place. By establishing, or helping clients establish these relationships, and thereby expanding the spheres where clients are in-place, clients may move into community homes, into work environments, into community activity centres, etc. However, moving to other locations like community environments is not a necessary precondition for considering the citizenship of clients to be successful: clients can just as well be in-place in an institution. An essential aspect of this citizenship notion is that exactly what being-in-place amounts to, varies from person to person.

Whereas I introduce 'being-in-place' as a positive ideal, similar concepts, such as 'belonging' and 'being-at-home', have been developed as critical concepts. Although further research will need to be done to study the exact relationship between being-in-place and other concepts, I would like to make some preliminary comparisons between being-in-place and related concepts. Firstly, like the concept of belonging, being-in-place also speaks of citizens' relationships with other people and groups. However, a central and innovative aspect of being-in-place is that in addition, it refers to citizens' material environment, too. This material environment is for a large part constitutive of the degree to which clients and other citizens are in-place. Another distinction between being-in-place and other concepts is the dynamic nature of my notion of being-in-place. While, for instance, being-at-home always indicates one static point of reference (the home), being-in-place refers only to being a citizen in relation to one's environment and, as people move, they can establish new relations to this environment at different locations.

After developing the notion of being-in-place in relation to the mental health practice that I studied, the notion may itself travel elsewhere. Locations to travel to probably include other mental health practices, but perhaps other long-term care
settings, too, like elderly care and even debates on the citizenship and participation of immigrants. In the case of care for the elderly, for instance, the notion of being-in-place prompts questions such as: What does it take for elderly people to be in-place? Does it require them to remain in their own homes, or in the area they lived for many years, because of the way these environments at least in part constitute their identities? Or can they also be in-place in other locations? What would be required of the human and material environment for the elderly to be in-place elsewhere? Answers to these sorts of questions may go towards helping the elderly and disadvantaged groups be more in-place, thereby fostering their citizenship. The answers may even be relevant to us all, as being-in-place may be a notion of citizenship that applies to all people. Future research will have to show whether this is indeed the case.

6.3 Non-Human Actors in-Place

My focus on everyday practices, relationships and materiality helped me to articulate a new notion of citizenship for long-term mental health clients. As explained in my introductory chapter, this focus was drawn from a specific methodology – Actor-Network Theory (ANT) – developed in Science and Technology Studies. Can my new concept of citizenship for clients of long-term mental healthcare also feed back into this research methodology? I think it can. I will support this claim by introducing a short ANT-like analysis of an everyday, material type of object cherished by Dutch Science and Technology researchers (cf. Bijker 1997): my bike. Actor-Network Theory’s main argument is that (scientific and technological) objects exist as networks of relationships between people and things. By continually performing these relationships, objects are formed and remain. In the case of my bike: if bikers, manufacturers, steel, bicycle lanes, bike stands, bells, traffic regulations, my bicycle pump and a host of other actors (actants) continue to perform the same relationships together, the object ‘my bike’ will continue to exist. If, however, any of the actors within this actor-network falls away, resists, or otherwise causes rupture within the actor-network, ‘my bike’ as I know it will cease to be. Latour showed that the ties between the actors holding the network together ought to be strong and steady for an object to be able to travel and remain
stable (Latour 1987). Of course, there can be change (transformation, translation), but to translate is to betray: change creates new objects (Law 1999).

In this thesis, I have shown that the nature of relationships can vary and that objects are not only enacted in networks consisting of strong relationships between actors. The claim is similar to the arguments of (post-)Actor-Network Theorists who describe the different kinds of relationships that underlie ‘fluid objects’ (de Laet and Mol 2000, Mol and Law 1994), ‘fire objects’ (Law and Mol 2001) and ‘phantom objects’ (Schrader 2010). The existence of these objects does not depend on the strong and steady relationships described in Latour’s analyses, but on relationships that change and relationships that only temporarily, or partially exist. In chapter four, I described the value of a specific kind of relationship between humans: weak relationships. Is this kind of relationship also relevant to actor-networks? Returning to my bike, I find that it is in contingent contact with other actors. For instance, it occasionally connects with free, compressed air stations that have recently popped up all over the city of Amsterdam and where, as the need arises, I pump up my tires. The bike’s link with these stations is weak; it can function well without them. Therefore, compressed air stations are not obligatory passage points (Callon 1986) for this object’s survival. However, compressed air stations do relieve me from the laborious task of manually pumping air into the tires, or walking all the way home on a rainy day. Compressed air stations help maintain and ‘oil’ my bike’s actor-network: the bike as a means of transport is merely made a little more convenient thanks to them. Thus weak relationships in human/non-human actor-networks function similarly to the weak relationships in the human networks described in this thesis: they act as a lubricant between actors. To conclude: what is important about weak relationships for actor-networks is not that they are essential for object survival, but that they make the actor-network somewhat more robust and at the same time more flexible.

6.4 Citizenship: Everyday Practices, Relationships & Materiality

In this last section, I place this thesis within the broader field of studies on citizenship. I discuss how each of the three themes of everyday practices, relationships and
materiality individually relate to the notion of being-in-place, suggest how future research may benefit by concentrating on these themes and contrast my approach with work done within other approaches.

6.4.1 Everyday Practices

The first theme that runs through the analysis performed in this thesis is a focus on everyday practices. In chapter four, I coined the term ‘everyday citizenship’ to describe this take on citizenship. The notion of everyday citizenship is constituted by everyday activities like shopping. Everyday activities are crucially connected to my notion of being-in-place. While clients may or may not be in-place when they perform other, less mundane activities, their everyday practices in particular make them be in-place. This is so because those are the activities through which clients can make connections with their human and material environment. It is thus essential for clients to perform these everyday activities – by themselves, or in the company of buddies (volunteer friends).

Probably, clients can also be in-place by performing other everyday activities than those described in this thesis, such as visiting a public park, taking public transport or walking a dog. These activities are opportunities for clients to interact with the material and human environments outside of their homes, in everyday situations. In this interaction, a sense of being-in-place may or may not arise. Studying these sorts of activities can inform us about exactly how everyday interactions contribute to clients’ being-in-place. One might, for instance, wonder whether citizens’ relationship to animals is relevant for the degree to which clients are in-place, and thus to citizenship (cf. Haraway 2003, Singer 1980). Studying the everyday practice of walking dogs can reveal whether this is the case and how the dog, other dog walkers, the park and other aspects of walking dogs connect with the dog walker’s identity. How do these aspects enable the dog walker to be a citizen and undertake other activities that would otherwise not have been possible? Dog walkers could, for instance, chat with other dog walkers and thereby expand their relational network. More research into this and other everyday activities may produce valuable answers to these sorts of questions and lead to further insight into ways of enacting and fostering citizenship.
Communitarian and care ethicists’ approaches to citizenship also pay attention to everyday activities, be it that communitarians start from existing communities in order to see how these give meaning to everyday practices. However, other approaches to citizenship do not seem to take heed of everyday activities as ways of enacting citizenship. For instance, scholars inspired by republican theories of citizenship study how people have a voice in and communicate their voice on distinct topics. They investigate exemplary civic practices like participation in town meetings, in community councils, polling, etc. The people’s hearing in the opening section of this thesis would probably have been of great interest to them. My discussion of this people’s hearing pointed to the limitations of this take on citizenship for long-term mental health clients. Satisfactory public participation of clients depends on whether they can attain the ideals of autonomy and independence. But are these ideals the right ideals? Can people who do not want or cannot be informed about policy changes, or people who do not participate in public debates not enact citizenship? Are clients’ everyday interactions with other citizens not at least equally important to citizenship? Everyday citizenship starts from the premise that everyday interactions with others are that important and investigates in what way specific practices contribute to clients’ being in-place.

6.4.2 Relationships

The second theme that runs through my analyses of citizenship is a focus on relationships. This thesis thereby further develops the concept of relational citizenship coined by Jeannette Pols (2006) by also encompassing relationships with the material environment. Relationships are essential to my notion of being-in-place because the notion describes a specific kind of relationship: one in which clients experience a sense of familiarity with other people and the material environment. Clients do not have to know the specific people and things around them, but should experience some things they already know. To give some concrete examples: clients may be in-place in large, but unfamiliar shopping malls because they have visited similar malls before. Clients could be in-place in public transport simply because they are in the company of a friend. I previously noted that weak ties between clients and their environments can
contribute to being-in-place, too. Client-run bicycle repair shops, cooking projects and
the like are all excellent environments for clients to create weak ties with other citizens
– and strong ties with their co-workers. By providing (material) service to others,
clients may gain recognition through contingent interactions and gain a valuable place
within a community of weak ties. Unfortunately, these kinds of projects are currently
under pressure due to financial cutbacks. Other places where clients can socialize, such
as Psychiatry Cafés that offer sheltered but entertaining environments, may also
stimulate them to make contact with others.

Focussing on relationships feeds into citizenship discourses in two principal
ways. Firstly, my focus on relationships criticizes the ideal of individual independence
that is present in many liberal and to some extent in republican theories. On this
respect, I side with feminist theorists who claim that a concept of citizenship in terms of
individual independence could never account for how societies are or should be
organised (Sevenhuijsen 1996, Tronto 1993). Independence can only be staged as a
decisive ideal by ignoring certain supporting roles, practices and segments of society
(Tronto 1993). Conceiving of the citizenship of long-term clients’ in terms of individual
independence thus ignores valuable opportunities for clients to enact citizenship.
Conceiving of citizenship in terms of relationships, on the other hand, opens up these
relationships for further scrutiny. Both private and professional care relationships –
which from the perspective of independence can either obstruct, or are irrelevant to
citizenship – become interesting objects of study in themselves. By studying activities
undertaken in these relationships, further distinctions can be made between them:
while some relationships allow people to be in-place, others do not.

This brings me to the second way in which my focus on relationships feeds into
the citizenship debate. While I have focussed on the value of relationships for
citizenship, I do not take these relationships to constitute a homogeneous category.
When relationships receive attention in communitarian and feminist citizenship
discourses, it is usually the caring, reciprocal relationship, resulting in strong ties, that is
lauded as the connective tissue of societies. However, a diversity of relationships
emerges from chapters three and four. Chapter three, on gift-giving, mobilises a
different vocabulary for discussing relationships from chapter four on shopping: it
analyses professionalism instead of citizenship. But underlying the courteous and
personal relationships that are discussed in chapter three are actually the same two kinds of relationships that I discuss in relation to shopping in chapter four: those consisting of weak and strong ties. The chapter on gift-giving is based on the premise that social inclusion is constituted by ‘strong ties’. It concludes that giving courteous gifts does not create strong ties and hence does not enhance social inclusion. But my later chapter questions this conclusion: is there really no way for these kinds of gifts to foster clients’ citizenship? My analysis in chapter four suggests that they can. It makes a distinction between strong and weak ties and concludes that weak ties are constitutive to citizenship, too. Since courteous gifts appear to create weak ties, I conclude in retrospect that citizenship can be fostered through them after all. Weak ties can contribute to clients’ being-in-place. This is also the conclusion I would like to emphasise to other scholars studying social connectivity. Having conversations with people we do not know is a pivotal opportunity for enacting citizenship, since, assuming that these conversations are friendly, they can contribute to our being in-place in public spaces.

6.4.3 Materiality

The third theme that runs through my analyses of the citizenship of long-term mental health clients is a focus on materiality. The argument is that materiality is a basic citizenship theme. Being surrounded by a material environment that is in some way familiar is a condition for being in-place: it gives clients agency. Lacking a relationship of familiarity with the environment can cause clients to lack agency: they cannot act satisfactorily in their human and material environments. Although long-term clients of mental healthcare today may formally have citizenship status and can claim certain rights and resources, they need to be able to act in order to benefit from this status. Without a specific, idiosyncratic material environment, clients cannot even begin to enjoy the liberties and resources that the status of citizenship potentially gives them. Also, specific material objects may help clients to be in-place. Flowers grown in a community garden project, or bicycles repaired in a client-run repair shop are material objects that can serve as gifts, or commercial products. These objects cause clients to have contact with other citizens. For living environments, I suggest that it could be
important that these environments are, in fact, homely – rather than resembling office spaces. It might also add to clients’ being in-place if they have some control over how these living places are decorated, because by decorating their material environment themselves, they can bring in objects and decorations that have meaning to them. For environments other than living environments, it might help if the environment offers clients familiar points of reference. For instance, if clients start working, it might be advisable to start working in neighbourhoods they know. Or, if clients wish to explore new territories, they may appreciate going in the company of a buddy, a friend, or a care professional they know well.

Hopefully, the conclusion that materiality is a basic citizenship theme will give rise to closer study of the role of materiality in how people enact citizenship. Other than the cases discussed in this thesis, I witnessed numerous other objects perform a curious or contested role in clients’ everyday lives during my fieldwork, too. Although I did not study these objects further, I did wonder about how sugar sachets, timetables, spare keys, dolls, clocks and plastic caps affected clients’ citizenship. For instance, one client at the rehabilitation home encouraged me and fellow clients to put the plastic caps of empty bottles in a special bag instead of throwing them away. “All people should collect caps,” she insisted, because wheelchairs for disabled children could be made from them. At the time, I was not at all sure about whether collecting the caps would indeed mean more wheelchairs for disabled children, but what this story does illustrate is that the caps enabled this client to connect to a prevailing citizenship discourse: recycling. Future research on these and other kinds of material objects and environments could reveal new ways of enacting citizenship that may help clients to be more in-place.

As noted in the introduction, the theme of materiality is not often discussed in other citizenship approaches, and when it is, discussion revolves around concern about whether people are able to accumulate material resources. This thesis can be seen to complement these sorts of approaches since the ethnographic chapters hint at an interesting reversal in the role of materiality. People may bring together material resources. This thesis shows that specific material objects and environments, such as flower bouquets and shops, can be seen as bringing people together, too. Flower bouquets are meant for giving, products in shops are meant to be bought. In bringing
people together, flower bouquets, shops and numerous other material objects and environments can contribute to people’s being in-place: with these material objects and environments, relationships can be established and maintained.

6.5 Conclusion

Thinking about citizenship for long-term mental health clients is often in terms of the values autonomy and independence. But the implementation of these ideals in mental health practice can lead to distressing situations in which mental health clients are overtaxed, lonely, neglected, or socially excluded. In order to combat these problems and be able to propose viable alternatives, mental healthcare is in need of new ways of thinking about the citizenship of its clients. In this thesis, I have presented a new citizenship vocabulary for long-term mental health clients: citizenship as being-in-place. It is an integrated notion since it encompasses two elements of older citizenship concepts: clients’ everyday activities and clients’ relational networks. An innovative aspect of the notion of being-in-place is that it directly links citizenship to concrete, human and material, everyday environments, i.e. the places citizens are in. It is concerned with how the relationships established in these environments make people be in-place. I have argued that making human and material environments more familiar to clients of long-term mental healthcare is an important way of helping them enact citizenship. I conclude that it is paramount to sustain and develop projects and practices that support clients in relating to their human and material environment.

References


