When residential environment affects: anthropology of the inhabiting functions in a stigmatised environment

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Abstract

In this paper, I will address the theme of residential environment and health. The paper will try to demonstrate how residential environments through an analysis of inadequate housing, affects the inhabitants towards the inhabiting function. The overall aim of this submission is to describe how such housing in a deprived residential environment context negatively affects the inhabiting function and in this way creates social suffering. Living in decent conditions affords access to intimacy, privacy and hospitality, avoids outside threats and creates the conditions for a social subject to interact with the social world and his environment. The notion of “inhabiting” is to be considered as a relational process between oneself and the social body, between oneself and his environment. What happens then when dwellings and residential environment do not assure those functions? What happens when the residential environment being stigmatised depreciates the inhabitants? How do the inhabitants see and understand themselves? What are the expressions of social suffering? What kind of skills and tactics do the inhabitants develop to face up and deal with this environment?

Using anthropological data and ethnographical research work undertaken in the urban area of Marseille (France), in rundown suburban condominiums, private housing, inadapted homes, we will describe how energy deprivation, damp, lack of running water, overcrowding, malfunctioning lifts, insalubrity have consequences on everyday life and on mental health, and how residential environment is felt to be stigmatising and depreciating for the inhabitants and affects the relation process to themselves.

Introduction

This paper is an offshoot of an ongoing thesis in anthropology. The aim of the PHD concerns fuel poverty and the notion of comfort in precarious housing. Fuel poverty is a new political concern in France and as yet has not received an official definition unlike in the UK. In the UK Fuel poverty is defined as needing to spend more than a tenth of income on energy. People in fuel poverty are disadvantaged by three elements: poor housing (low energy efficiency standards, concentration in hard to treat housing), energy prices (lack of participation, unfair payment methods, rising energy prices), low income (fuel expenditure represents a much higher proportion of income).

With regard to the front line actors, twenty interviews have been made. The purpose was to make them talk about problems of comfort and discomfort in housing and to see if the issue of fuel poverty would be dealt with in their speeches. The second goal of the interview was to point out to which empirical realities those matters were related too. “Front line actors” are defined in this work as social professionals or volunteers that encounter in their activities households in social, economical and/or...
housing difficulties and that have access to the dwellings. Therefore doctors, social workers from various institutions and militants of housing rights participate in the survey.

Those two studies show that the way French public policies define the target population is different from the way front line actors regard fuel poverty on the ground. Public policies do not especially refer to different types of housing because the population thought of as being in fuel poverty is mainly the household that can not pay their energy bill.

However, front-line actors have made many links between poverty, the type of housing and fuel poverty. Indeed for them fuel poverty is at stake in run down housing, unmaintained condominios and squats. Fuel poverty can recover various situations in different types of housing: energy deprivation, damp, mould, lack of running water, malfunctioning lifts, difficulties to pay utility bills or rent, lack of light, which have consequences in every day life.

Once the types of housing had been defined, the fieldwork could start: twenty interviews with twelve households were made in various housing categories: squats, rundown private housing in city centre and unmaintained condominios and ethnography of families are being done.

At the same time, I practiced participant observation - twenty visits in squats inhabited by “Romany migrants”, 5 participant observations during social workers’ visits to private unmaintained dwellings, and have observed about 15 local councils with households living in precarious housing.

The residential environment

The main field of this research is being done in what it is called in Marseille the “north area”. “The north area” in French “quartiers Nord” has a strong reputation of delinquency, poverty and are being stigmatized. Spaces of relegation, the North area are distant from the centre of the town and concentrate the major part of the social housing of the city (47% of the social housing of the town is in the North Area). Indeed, a few social and economical indicators can help revealing inequalities in between, the North area and other area of the city. For instance, the rate of unemployment are the more important in the city 27% for the 15th quarter, and 24% for the 14th quarter in 2007, while it is, for the rest of the city 14,1 % and 9, 5 % for France. The level of qualifications is less important and, the part of beneficiaries of social assistance is much higher than from the rest of the city. 37% of the beneficiaries of the RSA1 live in the “North Area”.

“The North area” concentrates social difficulties: poverty and unemployment but also geographical difficulties. Far from the centre of the town, having few public transports (after nine o clock at night they are no more buses), they are felt by their inhabitants as a space of relegation.

Social and economical difficulties are being accumulated by a feeling for the inhabitants to live in a deprived and stigmatized environment: “When I go out in the centre I never say that I live here, I am ashamed”, explain an inhabitant. This feeling is generated by the social and economical difficulties by the geographical situation of the neighborhood, by the facts that the apartments are deteriorated, and also by the presence of delinquency. A few drugs dealer especially dealing hashish, robbers or burglars are present in the area and are being visible. Staying on the playground outside, the inhabitants can see them. Also, recently about 40 flats under 700 that contain the neighborhood have been burglarized in within 3 months. This situation has generated fear, especially, while the inhabitants have been intimidated by whom they think to be the robbers. Those events make the inhabitant to feel fear. Fear is an ongoing process in this area and constitutes one of the “scheme” of significations for the inhabitants. Also fear has various forms: fear that their children will choose delinquency, fear of the owners, anxiety concerning problems that poverty implies: it is always on the inhabitant’s mind the difficulties to pay electricity’s and gas’s bills and the rent. Consequently, despite the inhabitants have strong links with their neighbors, have friends in the district, fear is always present. If burglars, robbers, are present in the area, another kind of actors creates fear: the owners.

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1 RSA means Revenus de Solidarité Active and concerns social assistance for unemployed people, it is about 400 euros a month for a single person.
Indeed the field takes place not in social housing but in private housing. The flats belong to private owners that have in between one to 15 flats to rent. Because the populations are vulnerable, because they have residential problems to accede to a flat, owners make profit of the situation intimidate the inhabitants and get good money from the rent of flats that are not always in good state. A flat 70 m², in this area cost about 800 euros which is the cost of the same flat in the center of the town or in posh areas. As we will see later, the flats can have big problems: like a lack of electricity, of hot water, windows that do not closed or humidity. Consequently, the area can appear for the inhabitants as a space where the law is not being respected: indeed if delinquency is present, the practices of the owners and their agencies come to reinforce the feeling of a lack of right in a specific environment. “here we are not the same, it is not like the rest of Marseille, it is specific, nothing happens as it should”, says an inhabitant.

The feeling of living in a deprived environment has many sources: a lack of right in a geographical situation specific, in a space of relegation, social and economical difficulties, and the feeling of living in indecent conditions concerning their flats. Those factors create social sufferings. They have consequences on self esteem, on the possibility to inhabit and come to deteriorate identity of the inhabitants. By the way, the area where takes place the field is populated by migrants. Most of them come from Mayotte, or the “Comores”. If for the inhabitants, living in an area where there is an aggregation of people from their own country participates of an argument to go to live their, they also testify that this aggregation creates discrimination and segregation. Indeed, most of them, explain that the aggregation of black people in the same area, underlines the stigmatization of the area: “yes here we are all blacks, only blacks people live here, and in France it is not easy to be black, to find a flat, to find a job etc… but when you have many blacks people that live in the same area, the stigmatization of the area is more important”, say an inhabitant.

Before analyzing the consequences of inadequate housing on the functions of inhabiting and on health, it is time to describe what “inhabiting” means.

**What ‘inhabiting’ means**

It is important to go beyond the concept of housing and dwelling to privilege the notion of “inhabiting”. Indeed the dwelling would be the functional part of ‘inhabiting’, it would be the place that enables the action of inhabiting.

To inhabit refers to the dwelling but also to the living environment, from the stairwell out to the neighborhood and to the district. The notion of “inhabiting” is to be considered as a relational process between oneself and the social body: It is a relational process between the dweller and his dwelling but also between the dweller and his close environment. The theoretical framework of ‘inhabiting’ is related with approaches in urban sociology (Petonnet, 1979) Florence Bouillon (2007), or the philosopher Lucien Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1974) who have all demonstrated that inhabiting enables one to belong to a social body and social networks.

On the side, it is linked to the philosophy of Heidegger (Heidegger, 1958). Heidegger reminds us that in the German language ‘Bauen’ refers to well being. The word “Wohnung”, which means in English ‘dwelling’, comes from ‘wunian’ which means to be happy, in peace. He reminds us that to be in peace is mostly to be protected from threats, to be saved and safe….“Bauen” in German which means to build in English has therefore a relation to the verb ‘sein’ to be. Thus it can be understood that the notion of inhabiting is related to the essential and fundamental functions a human being to be in relation with the social body. To inhabit is a social and relational process.

We will see that when the functions of inhabiting are negatively impacted, it has consequences on health and can create social suffering. Health is considered in this paper as a "physical and
psychological relation to the social and political body” (Fassin, 2000), and consequently is related to social suffering because “Social suffering (...) brings into a single space an assemblage of human and problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience. Social suffering results from political, economic and institutional power does to people and reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman, 1996: Xiii). Therefore health “is a social indicator and indeed a social process” (Kleinman, 1996: xiii).

In this presentation we will describe four main functions of inhabiting such as security and protection, access to privacy and intimacy, keeping one’s identity, and establishing relationships with others.

**Security and protection**

To inhabit signifies to be preserved from outside threats, to be safe and secure, it is the place where the inhabitant is able to draw a border between the outside world and him/herself which symbolises the border between the private and the public sphere. To inhabit signifies the way to be protected from others. It is also the preferred place to be at peace and at rest. It is the place where words and sayings do not have social consequences: being protected from the look from outside is the condition for putting a symbolic border between oneself and others.

**Access to privacy and intimacy**

As a protection against outsiders’ look, inhabiting is a condition for having access to privacy and intimacy. In European countries, in the twenty-first century, most of the intimate acts of every day life such as personal hygiene, intimate relationships with somebody, take place where people inhabit (Goubert, 1986). Intimacy is a condition of well being (Bouillon, Girard, Musso, 2002) because it enables the individual to have access to himself and his identity.

**Keeping one’s identity**

Inhabiting is the social and spatial place that partly allows individuals and families to build their identity, because inhabiting is the condition which allows to project oneself in time and space. It allows to decorate, and to cook which are two of the modalities of identity strengthening (De Certeau, 1994). Inhabited spaces are emotionally charged, it is not the value of the building that is at stake but the emotional charge which is part of the individual’s identity that makes sense. Therefore “inhabitating” creates an enabling environment for building a relationship between the subject and himself through a practice of intimacy. It strengthens identity continuity and enables him to face changes by adapting his personality without breaking its unity.

**Relationships with others**

Finally, to inhabit allows the subject to enter into relationships with others. By providing personal hygiene, it is possible for the individual to have social relations, we will see further on how fuel poverty can limit access to hygiene and how it can have consequences on relations between oneself and others, and lowers self-esteem. Furthermore, inhabiting allows one to offer hospitality and turn a stranger into a guest. Consequently inhabiting is a relational process with oneself, to others and the social body. In a similar way, it can have consequences on the way we relate to the social world. In this second part, we are now going to see through the use of anthropological data expressions of how the inhabiting functions are distorted and what kind of incidences fuel poverty has on health. We will try to focus on the data by analysing “emotional categories” (Jaffré, 2006), such as social isolation, shame, and dignity.

**When fuel poverty harms the “inhabiting functions”**

**Security and protection**

This first dimension refers to the traditional link made by public policies and epidemiological research between health and housing. The notion of security and protection refers firstly to health and physical danger. For instance the French law concerning “decency and insalubrity” which is part of the public
health code stipulates that “decent housing is the one where do not appear obvious risks that can affect physical security or health”.

The forms of risk linked to fuel poverty and dangers in dwellings are multivarious. They can result from fire, consequences of rundown electric power supply; risk of electrocution when there is unprotected proximity between water and electricity; poisoning by carbon monoxide when the heating system is defective and the dwellers do not open the window in winter because of the cold. In France 5 000 people go to hospital every year because of carbon monoxide poisoning and 100 people die. Also mould and damp create asthma, respiratory infections, and allergies (Shaw, 2004; Butler S. William M., Tukuintonga C., Paterson J, 2003).

Forms of fuel poverty create insecurity and danger and they distort the first function of inhabiting by distorting security and rest. « The landlord is threatening me. He never helped me. He just left me in this hut with holes in the walls full of damp and doors which cannot be shut., with mould on the walls, which are falling apart. I wish somebody would come and see what’s going on. We cannot sleep in the damp and my son is ill ! ».

Therefore by becoming insecure the dwelling becomes a threat to the inhabitants and we can observe that in those cases, beyond epidemiological effects, emerges the first effect on well being. Indeed, how is it possible to inhabit in a space we feel threatened by? It is in those forms of alteration of the inhabiting that expressions of suffering reside. And this suffering can distort the being in his relational process to others and to himself:

« I can’t go on anymore like this! I think about it especially in winter as in summer, I am not at home. I go back to the « bled » (the home village) but, every single day I am disturbed, I feel ill at ease, I fear for the children in the staircase. I am cold because of the window and well, I don’t know but I keep on worrying. It turns to an obsession and I wonder what I am doing here. The truth is that we are not well. We are permanently ill at ease » (she is a housewife in the center of Marseille, badly housed where the staircase is threatening to collapse, where there is no separate bathroom and where the window is badly damaged).

Access to privacy and intimacy

How can fuel poverty affect the functions of privacy and intimacy?

The inhabited space enables people to do things that have a link with intimacy: to take a bath, to rest. In a considerable numbers of poor dwellings such as squats, rundown suburban condominiums, private housing and inadequate homes, the fact that the heater is defective affects daily life. Indeed, in those types of dwellings it is frequent that only one room in the housing is heated in an appropriative way. This fact means that in all other spaces of the dwelling the inhabitants can feel the cold and that they have tendency to stay in the heated room which provides thermal comfort. Fuel poverty in this case, creates a form of overcrowding. Once, on a visit to a family suffering from fuel poverty (in a degraded rundown condominium with 3 rooms and 4 children), a child told me:

“sometimes I rather go to the toilets, in this house, in winter we all stay by the heater, all of us, sometimes being in the toilets is relaxing, all on my own I can relax, I can dream, alone I taste a little bit of peace”.

Nevertheless, people elaborate strategies to recreate intimacy. They use wall-covering, curtains to recreate walls and divide the space in two rooms, but often complain about promiscuity. “I’m nineteen, I live with my parents and my sister, in a one bed-room flat, I have no intimacy, to study it is difficult, and now I am becoming a woman, it is difficult, no intimacy, no privacy” (badly housed student in the city centre).

The second way fuel poverty has an incidence on intimacy and privacy, appears in the difficulties people have to get access to personal hygiene. To have access to personal hygiene is a way of maintaining ones identity, of belonging to the social world because it is one of the conditions for interaction with othersness.

Moreover, for homeless people, the difficulties to get access to personal hygiene represents one of the more unbearable hardships of living on the streets (Lees, 2007). Indeed, in squats, slums, rundown condominiums, inadequate homes, having access to personal hygiene can be tiring: it signifies being preoccupied, on an everyday basis, with getting access to water, notably to hot water. Not being clean, feeling that the person does not smell nice, is also to be looked down by others, to be stigmatised.
'Mixité': an urban and housing issue?

(Goffman, 1994): the person feels incapacitated in his possibility to be in a relation with others, because the society can reflect a degrading and discrediting image of oneself. Similarly in rundown condominiums and undesirable housing, functioning water heaters are not provided. To heat water for personal hygiene becomes therefore a tiring daily exercise. For instance, in these dwellings, families boil water on the gas cooker. This takes time and requires organization: bringing boiled water from the kitchen to the bathroom can be dangerous especially when several children live in the house. Also, when several children live in the house, it is difficult for the housewife to give every child his bath every day: this can create suffering:

“Sometimes it is true that it is not easy in the 13th or 14th district. For example there is the problem with the water heater, which is not working: How do you manage to have a shower and give the children a bath? Well, you have to heat the water on the gas and then you bath even when it is really cold and it is very cold. This is tiring. Well, my landlord is nicer and changed the water heater when I called him. We have hot water now but the former one did not even give us our money back. He said that we had damaged the kitchen as there were stains on the ceiling. As for the damp, he accused us of being responsible for it and he kept the warranty. But we were not responsible! When we first arrived, everything was rotten and dirty. We even did some work to feel better and it is my husband who did the repairs. This is the truth”. “I am ashamed, ashamed for my children because sometimes they do not smell really nice because I could not give them a bath, and when he comes back from school, when he cries, I ask him what’s the matter, and he says “it is the others, they said that I do not smell good, and they don’t want to play with me.”

Access to hygiene reveals how inadequate housing can have consequences on social relations and how it has consequences on self esteem that can create social suffering and affect health as a relational process between the individual, his body and the social body.

Keeping one’s identity

How does the fact of living in a space threaten identity?

Inhabiting a proper house can provide the possibility of developing such activities as cooking, decorating or cleaning. Living in a fuel poverty situation can restrain those functions. It can be dangerous to cook, tiring to clean all day long a flat where they are bad smells that do not disappear, or to paint and recover damp marks. Those situations produce exhaustion and affect well being.

“You know it is also true that in the 13th I had to go and cook at my neighbour’s because the gas was never high enough. So I had to go everyday! to cook and one day the neighbour said that she didn’t see how I could cook for my children if she was not there. I realised she was right so I call GDF and they explained to me that one spare part was not working and that I should send it back. That is what I did but I sent it to Marseille and not to Lyon for I didn’t know it had to be sent to Lyon. In fact as it was dangerous and leaking, GDF came to cut the gas. So when I came back, I remember it was a Friday, I went up and saw they cut off the gas. I went out to look for the gas man but he had left in the mean time. I called GDF again and asked them how I could manage without gas. They told me I needed to have an appointment but they could not come before a fortnight. I explained it was not possible to wait for so long without heating as it was winter and that I couldn’t cook for the children. They understood but said it was impossible for them to come before.”

Rundown housing creates all kinds of suffering which emerge. People say that:

“They can’t stand it anymore and get fed up. They have low spirits, are tired and are hopeless. They feel like trapped animals in cages without light and air. The smell disgusts them and they feel worse than dogs in these kinds of dwellings where they live with rats and cockroaches. They are exhausted and it is urgent for them to leave as they cannot see the end of the tunnel. It is easy to see how these types of housing have an impact on their psychological suffering. They often mention how sad they are, how exhausted they feel and how depressed they get. They do not see a way out of their predicament. They cannot go on like that for long”.

It is possible to observe some fears which are related to forms of symbolic contamination activated by fears of real contamination, especially when rats and cockroaches “populate” the dwelling. Incidentally people fear being contaminated from the juvenile delinquent as much as they fear being contaminated by rats. These fears constitute the main reasons for leaving their housing; living in a rundown dwelling allows fear to undermine oneself. To inhabit such housing becomes painful,
because it affects identity, people feel degraded with a drop in their social standing: « We live like dogs, worse than animals. ».
They also have difficulties in projecting themselves in space and time, feel ashamed of themselves, because by damaging their relation to themselves, their housing has an influence on their relation to others, it becomes impossible to invite a relative, a neighbour.

**Relationships with others**

Living in a situation of fuel poverty leads many people to be ashamed of themselves. As a consequence they do not want to invite their relatives or anybody to see their living conditions: « I don’t invite my husband’s family to come and see that we live with the cockroaches and rats. I don’t like the idea of their coming. What will they think of us? » We do not want people in our country to know about it: « I don’t invite my neighbour for fear our people in our country will learn about it ». The problem of staircase or lift breakdown illustrates another expression of fuel poverty that produces isolation. Indeed, when families live on the 10th floor or 12th floor, and the lift is broken, life is to be reorganised.

Also, visitors come less and less often when they have to climb ten floors to see a relative. This is not an isolated phenomenon, during our study, many lifts were broken down or never repaired, I have encountered a woman who had been living for 6 months on the thirteenth floor, without a lift.

“Well, it’s working, it was repaired but after some time it was out of order again, then it worked for 3 or 4 months. 17 floors! It means a lot for the families when you live on the 10th floor, to go up the staircase with your shopping bags, the pushchairs for the babies with the shopping. You have to make choices. Physically, you organise your day differently because you will have to go up on foot. After you leave in the morning, you do your small shopping, you stop at your friend’s where you wait till you can get your kids from school. You are not going to go down to fetch the kids when you know you have to climb the 10 floors again. This is without mentioning the fact that the flat is badly insulated and the wind gets in. It is awful because once you have reached your flat, you don’t go out anymore. Then, in the morning or during the weekend you have to make a decision: Shall we stay in or shall we go out? Life is completely organised around that problem ».

In the preceding quote, we can understand how an ordinary breakdown can affect the process of life and modify social links. To such an extent that when such a situation persists, it clearly creates isolation, a form of social suffering that can lead to depression. It is also very tiring and when the inhabitants are not healthy, their health get even worse. Deterioration of physical health is added to social suffering, which makes isolation even worse.

“*The last time I went to see a friend who had just given birth after a 9 month pregnancy. Well the lift was only working up to the 6th floor whereas she lives on the 10th. She went out of hospital 3 weeks ago and had to climb up to the 10th floor. Imagine, she had had a cesarian! This is unbearable!!!*”

(social worker)

Living at the 10th floor without a lift can also create problems related to access to health. Indeed, in such housing, it is rare that nurse or doctors accept to come regularly to take care of a patient living on 10th floor without a lift.

“Well, it is like that! And you have even more tragic situations! In the G building, I followed a pregnant mother who became diabetic at the end of her pregnancy and every the nurse refused to climb up the 11 floors and she lost her baby. Was it because of that or something else, I don’t know but after giving birth, her baby only survived a few hours before dying. And then, she did not receive any treatment because of the lift!! Then she underwent another operation because of a hemorrhage! There are some complexe things and it was the same again for changing her bandages. We did not find anybody to climb the stairs and she was left alone in her flat with her pain and her grief about losing her child, all alone with a 3 year old child unable to go down and to take her child to school everyday. It took her time to get better and to be able to cope with the outside world. It generates tremendous isolation, doesn’t it? »

(social worker)
Conclusion

Regarding fuel poverty, links between environment and health are usually made within the epidemiological analysis; which focuses on the link between fuel poverty and health or fuel poverty and mental health. In this paper the point is to focus on affective categories such as self esteem, shame, relationship with identity, and to try to demonstrate how bad housing by affecting these categories, creates social suffering and deteriorates health. Fuel poverty contributes to degradation in inhabiting functions. This form of degradation expresses itself in forms of suffering that affect the inhabitants through deterioration in health, which in its turn leads to degradation of the social link, which itself bears on health. Therefore within the notion of inhabiting we saw how fuel poverty can deteriorate the relations between oneself and the social body, and go beyond the concept of health to use “social suffering”, which is a physical or psychological suffering related to the social and political body, health should be a social indicator and a social process, just as suffering is the result of a social experience.

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