Social spaces of little people: the experiences of the Jamisons

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Dwarfs, midgets, even freaks, are the terms that have been used to label little people. Little people are individuals who for genetic or hormonal reasons grow to a height of less than 4 feet 8 inches (1.42 m). While little people face similar issues of access to those of other physically disabled groups, they live in spaces that are designed, both physically and socially, for people of ‘average height’. In addition, little people face unique stigmas that are historically rooted in mythology, idealized body types, and the commodification of body difference for profit. This paper draws upon the spatial conception of Henri Lefebvre and the premise that social spaces are produced. Specifically, this paper offers the term, staturized space, to describe how the material environment produces relative stature in common representations of space. Furthermore, it identifies the ways in which dwarfism affects social relations as they are played out in spaces intended for average-height people. Finally, this study describes the ways little people’s homes and meetings of the organization Little People of America are re-staturized spaces both physically and socially. The production of such alternative social spaces produces enabling and normative environments for little people. These issues are explored through in-depth interviews and participant observations with a married couple in which both individuals are little people. The case study of the Jamisons is part of a larger project which seeks to reveal aspects of the social spaces of a population that is difficult to access and frequently misunderstood. Geographers can benefit from the perspectives of little people by becoming increasingly sensitized to discourses of height and their material implications in the production of public and private spaces.

Key words: dwarfism, disability, social space, little people, Lefebvre.

Introduction

Geographers have examined the socio-spatial experiences of various groups that are marginalized in developed Western countries. One of the dominant themes to emerge from the literature of difference and disability is that the social interactions involving ‘different’ groups are projected into social spaces that are gendered (Rose 1993), sexed (Kirby and Hay 1997; Valentine 1993), raced (Delaney 1998; Hale 1998) and disabled (Chouinard 1999; Wendell 1997). Consistent with the production of these spaces, I suggest that social spaces are also
I use the word *staturized* to refer specifically to the ways in which everyday spaces are, in most cases, designed by and for individuals of ‘average’ height. I observe that spaces are staturized both physically (in terms of accessibility) and socially (in terms of reflecting cultural norms and values suggested by those spaces). To gain insight into the effect of staturized spaces, I investigate the social-spatial experiences of *little people*, commonly referred to as dwarfs.

There are over 200 types of dwarfism with various hormonal or genetic causes that result in a stature of less than 4 feet 8 inches (1.42 m) in adulthood. Dwarfs are among the ‘disabled’ groups who are recognized under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. However, dwarfism differs from other disabilities involving stature such as those experienced by people in wheelchairs. For example, while some little people have limited mobility, many have able bodies that are simply smaller than those of most adults. Hence, their disability is, in most cases, defined by their size rather than by physical impairment or disease. The participants in this study agreed that the social aspects of being little people were often more disabling than the physical ones.

Geographers such as Dear, Wilton, Gaber and Takahashi (1997) note that the naming process of disabilities, an inherently social act, is a significant influence on the response to physical or mental impairment. A variety of terms are used in reference to dwarfs; the most common are *dwarf* and *midget*. While *dwarf* is used in medical terminology, it is not the preferred term of ‘dwarfs’ with whom I have spoken. Nor do they like to be referred to as *midgets*. One participant told me that using *midget* to refer to little people is similar to using the word *nigger* in reference to people of African descent. Due to the social stigma of the word *dwarf*, I will henceforth refer to human dwarfs as *little people*, the preferred term of the participants in this research.

First, in order to put the following case study in context, a discussion of representations of little people addresses the roots of modern attitudes towards dwarfism. Second, the spatial trialectic outlined in *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre (1991) is used to understand the ways in which some little people negotiate public and private spaces. Finally, I conclude that the social and physical constraints of dwarfism produce social spaces that are at times dissonant with ‘normally’ heighted representations of public spaces. Such dissonances have social and material expressions that cause little people to experience public spaces differently from people of average height.

The following narrative and discussion are part of a larger study conducted during the research period (November 1999 to January 2001). The study included an Internet survey conducted on the dwarfism listserv of the organization Little People of America (LPA) as well as in-depth interviews with eight little people including a married couple, the Jamisons (all participants’ names have been changed). Also, in order to obtain a more corporeal understanding of how space is staturized, I conducted several participant observations including a holiday party of a regional chapter of LPA organized by the interview participants. In this article, I focus upon the descriptions of the experiences of the Jamisons, a married couple, both of whom are little people. From my conversations with the Jamisons, I gained insights into the socio-spatial challenges they face because their heights differ from those of most adults.

**The socio-historical representations of dwarfism**

Among the earliest records of little people are
those of ancient Egyptian and Greek culture. It appears that at least some little people were valued members of royal entourages. This is evidenced in artwork and in the discovery of royal graves where little people were laid to rest along with the remains of valued pets (Dasen 1993). Similarly, in early modern Europe, little people were kept as pets in palatial households where they might have been ‘dressed fancily, fed well, smothered with indelicate kisses and passed from lap to lap in amusement or offered to a powerful patron as a gift’ (Tuan 1998: 129).

In royal courts, little people were among the group of ‘fools’ who would entertain and advise rulers. By the late seventeenth century, little people and other ‘fools’ were less frequently supported by the courts. As a result many took to the stage to make a living (Tietze-Conrat 1957). As the Enlightenment sought to disenchant the world, any positive associations of little people with dwarf gods or folkloric characters were discredited (Sloterdijk 1987). Furthermore, the emphasis on rationality and objectivity affected perceptions of the body, especially disabled or ‘different’ bodies.

Scientific discourse, with its interest in predictability, emphasized uniformity over particularity. For example, the French statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1847) wrote: ‘[D]eviations more or less great from the mean have constituted ugliness in body as well as vice in morals and a state of sickness with regard to constitution’ (quoted in Davis 1997: 103). By the nineteenth century, professionalized medicine viewed as pathological any departures from the standard, average body (Thomson 1996). Thomson (1996: 12) notes that modernity effected a standardization of everyday life that saturated the entire social fabric, producing and reinforcing the concept of an unmarked, normative, leveled body as the dominant subject of democracy.

Furthermore, it is likely that the consolidated production facilities and the separation of home and work places characteristic of industrialization and urbanization reduced the economic opportunities for little people and other disabled persons. As Gleeson (1999: 109) observes, ‘[t]he rise of mechanized forms of production introduced productivity standards that assumed a “normal” (namely, usually male and non-impaired) worker’s body and devalued all others’.

The commodification of physical anomalies was in full force by the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1840, P.T. Barnum opened the American Museum in New York City. For the museum, he hired gypsies, fat boys, giants and ‘dwarfs’ (Bogdan 1988). In 1884, Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus opened a lucrative touring sideshow that brought ‘entertaining’ human oddities to customers outside of urban areas. The popular sideshow featured unusual people in freak shows. The freak shows not only represented disabled and anomalous bodies as freakish, but they contributed to what Thomson refers to as ‘the American cultural self’ (1996).

A freak show’s cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer’s indistinguishable body fades into the seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will, suitable to the uniform abstract citizenry democracy institutes. Thomson (1996: 10)

A common theme of exhibits of disabled and anomalous bodies is that they supposedly originated in ‘uncivilized’ places and were frequently depicted as being of ‘non-white’ races (Bogdan 1988). Eurocentric conceptions of geography based upon the colonizing capitalist exploits of the West were used to market the ‘freaks’ of dime-museum and circus exhibits.
Promotional biographies often referred to real places and events recontextualized into fictional descriptions of the ‘freaks’. For example, Hiram and Barney Davis, two retarded brothers with dwarfism, were advertised as The Wild Men of Borneo. The Davis brothers, displayed in front of a brightly painted jungle backdrop, were not from Borneo. However, Borneo had political relevance at the time as Britain and the Netherlands were vying for control of it in the mid-1800s (Bogdan 1988). Similar geographic references were used to sell The Original Aztec Indian Midgets who were actually microcephalic children with dwarfism from North America.

European geography was also used to sell little people, but such exhibits were not intended to be grotesque. For example, Charles Stratton ‘General Tom Thumb’ was marketed by P.T. Barnum to appeal to perceptions of ‘white’ European sophistication and aristocracy. In contrast to the ‘freaks’ from exotic and exploitable places, Stratton and others were portrayed as perfect human miniatures from European culture (Bogdan 1988). Similar to Stratton, other little people played roles that provided a parody of the association between tall stature and social status with titles such as Commodore Nutt and Princess Wee Wee (Thomson 1996).

Davis (1997) notes that the social process of disabling occurred with discourses that are linked to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality and sexual orientation. Reflecting these discourses, the positive and mystical social constructions of dwarfism gave way to the medicalization and diagnosis of physical difference during the Victorian Era (Moneymaker 1982). Also, during this time, science was used to rationalize the eugenics movement as a means of controlling the proportion of inferior bodies in societies. Short stature was among the characteristics deemed to be ‘inferior’ by eugenicists. For example, Charles Davenport, a leading scientific voice during the American eugenics movement, specifically warned of racial hybridization that would result from the immigration of short Southern Italians to the USA. Similarly, Madison Grant, a member of the Immigration Restriction League, specifically referred to the ‘dwarf stature’ of the typical Polish Jew as a threat to the superior Nordic American ‘race’ (from Tucker 1994). During World War II, the tragic intersection of national identity and dwarfism resulted in the gassing of approximately 10,000 little people by the Nazi regime (Drimmer 1985).

More recently, there has been an ongoing debate about whether dwarfisms and other disabilities should be viewed as pathologies or as part of the normal range of human variation. Clearly, the use of genetic technologies and sophisticated surgeries such as limb lengthening can be motivated by the intention to ‘improve’ lives, but also by the desire to make bodies conform to societal norms (Rennie 1993). In terms of physical abilities Wendell (1997: 263) asks, ‘within each society there is much variation from the norm of any ability; at what point does this variation become disability?’. However, in social terms, the limb-lengthening surgeries can be compared to the history of medical procedures that have been used to make other minorities conform to notions of ‘normality’. Such procedures include the lightening of skin colour of dark-completed peoples and surgeries that reshape the eyelids of East Asians (Kaw 1993). Hence, both physically and socially, dwarfism as a disability is largely socially constructed and its meaning varies in accordance with the nature of the associated problematic—‘normalcy’ (Corker 1999).
**Self-representations**

By 1903, Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus replaced the term ‘freak’ with ‘human curiosities’, supposedly in response to a group protest by the circus performers (Thomson 1996). This is one of the few historical examples of little people and other ‘freaks’ forwarding a counter-hegemonic representation of themselves. In contrast, contemporary little people represent themselves in a variety of ways in ongoing discourses of disability and civil rights. In particular, the World Wide Web offers a unique environment in which to resist persistent negative constructs of dwarfism. Organizations such as LPA have websites that offer accurate information and dignified, normative images of little people. LPA also provides access to chatrooms and listservs in which little people can congregate and share ordinary experiences. Founded in 1957 by actor Billy Barty, a little person, LPA serves little people as organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or National Organization of Women serve their members (Berreby 1996). Addressing both cultural and political issues of little people, LPA has helped little people to enter the arena of identity politics.

In terms of self-representation, a primary question is whether little people should assimilate or insist upon their difference in a society structured for people of average height (Berreby 1996). This question has both physical and social implications. For example, while LPA leaders advocate a normative identity for LPs socially, they, in general, discourage alterations of bodies to conform to societal norms of height. While some little people claim that the procedures such as limb lengthening have improved the quality of their lives, others see the surgery as effectively negating positive identities of dwarfism. Furthermore, since these surgeries are only performed on young people whose bones are growing, there is reason to question the degree to which children understand how these surgeries will alter not only their bodies, but also their identities in society.

From the stories of the little people I interviewed it was clear that, in terms of relationships and activities, they lead what they consider to be ‘normal’ lives. While they acknowledge that their bodies are ‘different’, the difference, in many circumstances, affects but does not constrain their daily activities. Yet, their ‘dwarf’ identity associates them with disability, mythology and entertainment. This identity, however, does not reflect the lives of many little people. For example, only 1 per cent of little people work in the entertainment industry (Ablo 1984). However, such perceptions contribute to the ongoing frustration of little people that their ‘dwarf’ identity often obscures the myriad of other identities that they share with many adults of average height.

Several of the little people with whom I spoke noted recent examples of more normative portrayals of little people in the media. However, as Gerber (1996: 49) observes, ‘[p]eople are still finding ways to exhibit dwarfs because of their physical condition, as the contemporary appearance of dwarf bowling and dwarf tossing has revealed’.

The preceding representations of dwarfism in Western civilization show a history of trouble honouring the dignity of the body and the diversity of bodies (Sennett 1994). Furthermore, it is indicative of a generalized ambivalence toward physical anomaly that has historically defined the social spaces of physically ‘different’ people. This cultural overview of representations of little people is useful in several respects. First, contemporary representations of little people are rooted in specific historical contexts. Second, in a rather confused and contradictory manner, such constructions of
dwarfism affect the social interactions of little people that produce their social spaces.

**Lefebvre, space and little people**

Recently, researchers in the social sciences have applied Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualizations of social space to a variety of projects (Bank and Minkley 1998; Chanan 1998). Furthermore, geographers have used Lefebvre’s theorization of social space to examine transgressions and resistance in public space (Domosh 1999; Mitchell 1995) and in disabilities research (Hawkesworth 2001). These researchers and others draw upon Lefebvre’s notion that space is both produced by and a producer of social relations. What is particularly relevant to this discussion is how socio-spatial relations, in effect, produce dwarfism. As Hawkesworth (2001: 300) observes, ‘[i]t is the intersection between the individual and their surroundings that quite literally constructs disability’. Simply stated, little people are only short in relation to other people and objects in the environment.

In this research, I apply Lefebvre’s trialectic of *spatial practice, representations of space* and *spaces of representation* in order to gain an understanding of how the interplay of these spaces impacts the lived experiences of little people. The *spatial practice* of little people refers to the ways in which they navigate the routes, networks and functionality of public spaces. *Representations of space* reflect the degree to which little people are perceived to be normal or deviant in public spaces designed by and for people of average height. Sometimes in contrast to representations of space, the *spaces of representation* of little people reflect their lived experiences in spaces staturized for people of average height.

The *spatial practices* of little people are affected by the relation between their extremely short stature and the everyday spatial routes and networks which are designed to be navigated and negotiated by individuals of average height. In short, it is the material routine of everyday life (Bank and Minkley 1998). Spatial practice is unreflective in terms of meaning. It is a constant of social life, a space that is not responsive to shifts in conceptions or lived experience (Stewart 1995). A concrete example of this is the spatial practice of using an automated teller machine (ATM). While such an activity may seem mundane and relatively effortless to individuals of average height, little people experience difficulties in using such machines due to their construction at a height above what is accessible. Other spatial practices such as using public transportation or shopping are also challenging for little people. Tess, a little person I interviewed during this research, notes that ‘little people want to be able to participate normally’. She explains:

On buses, sometimes the steps are hard for some people who are really short. And planes, I always try to get an [aisle] seat because I can’t climb over anybody. Putting your things in a bin above, you’ve got to get someone to get them down.

From her point of view, such difficulties of spatial practice make participating ‘normally’ difficult or impossible in some situations. Such difficulties can draw unwanted attention to the little person. Another woman, Jackie, explains her challenges as a little person on a train at rush hour. She says, ‘everybody’s packed in the train like sardines ... and [nobody] sees you there’. Another consideration is the relationship between time and distance when little people travel on foot. Even for those who are free of the joint and hip problems that little people frequently experience, it takes longer to go from one place to another. However, as
with many adults, little people often prefer to drive cars when travelling between places. As Jackie put it, cars are ‘equalizers’. With a few modifications such as seat cushions and pedal extensions, little people can travel inconspicuously with an additional sense of independence. Travel by car is especially important for spatial practices of little people because it is comfortable, convenient and frees them from the unwanted attention of others.

The dominant *representations of space* are also problematic for little people. For example, tallness is especially valued in American culture. Joan Ablon (1984) notes that the value on size can be traced to the American frontier ethos: bigger is better. Stature is expressed materially in the form of skyscrapers and public monuments such as the Washington Monument. Material expressions of size symbolize significance, power, attractiveness and wealth. Stature is expressed socially in everyday words and phrases that reflect cultural preferences and reinforce material expressions of preferred stature. For example, the desirability of tallness (but not giantism) is evident in phrases such as, ‘the ideal man is tall, dark and handsome’, impractical people are ‘short-sighted’, dishonest cashiers ‘short-change’ customers, losers get the ‘short’ end of the stick ... (Moneymaker 1982: 1).

Furthermore, dominant representations of height socially determine who is within the range of ‘normal’ and who is not. For little people, dominant representations of space can appear to be uninviting or exclusionary to them. Aside from the impacts on spatial practice, extremely short stature is often in conflict with the representational spatial cues that suggest belonging, accommodation, normality and inclusion. For example, when little people shop they not only have difficulty reaching items on shelves, but they are surrounded by representations of ‘normal’ bodies portrayed in advertise-
ments and mannequins in clothing stores. Hawkesworth (2001: 304) notes that ‘such visual presentations exist as a dominant and constitutive part of the built environment ... endorsing certain icons and body images’. The conspicuous absence of little people in fashion displays is similar to the lack of representation of working women with dependent children that Winchester observes in such stores. Winchester notes:

The advertisements for home and family-based consumption stress independence rather than dependence, the exciting rather that the mundane. It is no surprise to find that all the models are tall, slim, young ... but the image goes beyond these physical attributes to project a lifestyle of sport, fitness ... and independence’. (1992: 149)

As with working women of average height with dependent children, a lifestyle of sport, fitness and independence may not be available to many little people. Hence, the representation of such retail spaces suggests the dominance of average height and able bodies—not those of little people. Traditionally, the dominant spaces of representation where the presence of little people has been considered normal have been those of entertainment (nineteenth-century freak shows and contemporary television programmes) and treatments and cures for defective bodies (medical clinics).

Representations of space may devalue little people in terms of symbolism and accommodation, yet little people frequently value themselves as normal or even special in a positive way. Such dissonances in representation have led to the development of *spaces of representation* for little people that challenge the messages implicit in common representations of space. For example, dominant representations may cause disenfranchisement, yet little people have utilized cyberspace as a resistant space of
representation. Such resistance is manifest in websites that depict little people as ‘normal’, and in the construction of community through chatrooms and listservs that overcome challenges in spatial practice and a lack of sense of place in dominant representations of space.

The national meetings of organizations such as LPA also reinforce resistant spaces of representation. During national meetings of LPA, hundreds of little people from around the world gather in a particular city to socialize, disseminate information, network and make a collective impression on the hosting community. Such gatherings are frequently accompanied by local media coverage that helps to normalize the collective image of little people. Furthermore, the space appropriated for use during the conference is adapted to the specific needs of the visiting little people. In general, while little people face a variety of physical challenges that put them in conflict with dominant representations of space, they are making progress in closing the gap between dominant representation of space and their actual lived experience. They seek to be included, accommodated and recognized as normal within the dominant representational spaces of society.

Lefebvre’s spatial theory provides insight into complexities of the social spaces of little people. While little people have not been addressed in the literature on the production of space, this research is consistent with other studies that have examined the dialectical relationship between spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation of ‘different’ or marginalized people. The following narrative describes the socio-spatial experiences of two little people.

The experiences of the Jamisons

The following case study is a narrative of the experiences of Paul and Mary Jamison. While it is difficult to generalize from the stories of the Jamisons, their particular experiences tell us something about the social spaces of little people. As Josselson notes:

> When we aggregate people, treating diversity as error variance, in search of what is common to all, we often learn about what is true to no one in particular. Narrative approaches allow us to witness the individual in her or his complexity and recognize that although some phenomena well be common to all, some will remain unique. (1995: 32)

Furthermore, I find that interviewing the Jamisons together as a couple facilitates the reinforcement and development of the stories of both individuals. Concurring with Valentine (1999a: 68), the dynamics of the interview with the Jamisons encouraged ‘spontaneous further discussion, providing richer, more detailed and validated accounts than those generated by interviews with individuals’.

Paul is 42 years old, 4 feet 6 inches tall and works as a computer programmer. Mary is 34 years old, 4 feet 1 inch tall and works as an administrative assistant at a local college. I interviewed the Jamisons in a restaurant, at their home and was invited to a party that they organized. On these occasions our conversations covered a wide range of topics pertaining to their experiences as little people, all of which related to their negotiations of public and private space.

I arrived for the interview several minutes before the Jamisons and watched them walk from their car to the front door of the restaurant. Before meeting them, I was preoccupied with their short stature. Paul Jamison is an achondroplastic dwarf with short limbs, and
a relatively larger head; Mary is a Kniest Syndrome dwarf with a short torso with average size limbs. Yet, as they entered the restaurant I observed the common courtesy of Paul holding the door, which was heavy for him, while Mary entered the restaurant. This was my first observation of the contrast between the ‘difference’ of dwarfism and the simultaneous exhibition of normative behaviour. In this way, the Jamisons appeared to be both ‘different’ and ordinary. After they entered, I walked up to introduce myself and was very conscious of their looking up at me. Yet after we were seated in a booth, I noticed that the difference in height was de-emphasized. No longer standing, we were able to view each other eye to eye which seemed to put both the Jamisons and myself at ease for conversation.

Experiences in public space

As Teather (1999) notes, discursive spaces are produced by mental constructs that are shaped by events, reactions to events, values and media representations. For the Jamisons, public space is the arena in which their relation to discourses on dwarfism are played out. The Jamisons feel that their reception in public space is conditioned by average-height people’s exposure to little people in films, fairytales and contemporary mass media. Frequently portrayed as odd, mystical and clownish, little people are seldom depicted as the possible neighbour next door. Both Paul and Mary agree that the relatively small number of little people (1 in 10,000 births) increases the element of surprise for average-height people in public space and contributes to their being perceived as different or ‘other’. As Sibley (1995: 15) notes, ‘[b]ecause there is little or no interaction with “others”, the stereotyped image, whether “good” or “bad” is not challenged’.

Mary expressed this situation:

A lot of people have never met a little person and they form their opinions … on limited information. They’ve seen them in story books they’ve read … [but] they might not know that there really are little people out there. They think it’s fiction.

Paul adds, ‘Often we’re portrayed as evil or strange … rather than professional and normal’.

The Jamisons realize that their extremely short stature does not permit them to blend in with the crowd in public space. They are always conspicuous—they can never pass for being of average height. Because they are viewed as ‘different’, the Jamisons are sometimes viewed as being out of place in common representations of public space. Their experiences appear similar in some respects to the findings of Valentine (1993) regarding the alienation that lesbians experience in public spaces. Just as the (hetero)sexing of space reinforces the taken-for-granted way in which asymmetrical couples and families interact in public spaces, the staturalization of space reinforces the dominant preference for able bodies of average height. In the cases of height and sexuality, alienation is perpetuated in public spaces that are generally designed by and for heterosexual people of average height.

Navigating within ‘normal’ representations of public space becomes complicated when everyday spatial practice and the use of public facilities are inconvenient and challenging. A little person’s social status, for example, is diminished when he or she is seen having difficulty accomplishing a simple task such as using an ATM, getting on a bus, reaching for an item on a store shelf or opening a heavy door. Because these places are intended for average-height people, an otherwise capable and mature little person is perceived as being
childlike in relation to the physical environment.

The Jamisons encounter a range of curious or even hostile responses to them in public spaces. In many situations, people of average height are courteous, although they may stare. Paul mentioned the teasing comments of teenagers he sometimes encounters at the shopping mall. He said that his choice of response depends upon his mood. Sometimes he ignores the comments, other times he responds with something like, ‘what’s your problem?’ Either way, he is not surprised by such encounters. He knows that there is always the possibility of harassment when he is in public spaces. Generally, both Paul and Mary are forgiving of unwanted stares in public places.

Pratt and Hanson (1994) find that differences of class, race, sexual orientation, age and religion disrupt common gender identities. Similarly, extremely short stature also challenges ‘normal’ gender stereotypes. As Valentine (1999b) notes, men often conceive of their bodies in active terms, women often conceive of their bodies in terms of appearance. For men and women who are little people, their dwarfism complicates such conceptions. Mary comments on the challenges she and Paul face:

I think it is harder for a man because society thinks of the man as the taller, stronger one. And someone with dwarfism might not be able to, because of his height or physical state, do what other men can do. And a woman … it’s hard for a [average height] woman to be respected. But then when you’re a little person, you’re really babyed and looked down upon, even treated like a child.

The infantilizing treatment that Mary describes is commonly experienced by adult little people (Gerber 1996). It suggests an ambiguous identity in which a little person, like a ‘cute child’, is culturally positioned as an object. Further-

more, the little person, if viewed as ‘cute’, unintentionally transgresses the perceived socio-spatial boundaries between the representations of space intended for children and adults (Merish 1996).

I asked the Jamisons if there are particular places that they avoid because they are little people. Paul and Mary both said that they tend to shy away from large crowds. Paul expressed feelings of discomfort especially in large standing crowds. When he was younger, he would avoid frequenting nightclubs because most people are standing or dancing. In addition to the potential awkwardness of such situations, they can even be dangerous because of his short stature. Paul noted the exception of ball games where ‘you have your own seat … you’re not in danger. I’m pretty conscious about that, about keeping out of harm’s way’. Perceptions of safety affect the Jamisons’ choices of the times and places when they are in public. Although the Jamisons live in a small town and feel safe in their neighbourhood, they, because of their short stature, feel vulnerable to crime on the streets of larger cities, especially at night. Paul noted, however, that they had not experienced any incidents on the few occasions they have been walking at night.

Another feature of public space is the way in which people respect or disrespect culturally dictated conceptions of personal space. From the experiences of the Jamisons, it seems that people of average height assume that little people require little personal space, rather than the personal space allotted to average-size adults. Both Paul and Mary had experienced annoying violations of their personal space in public. Mary explained:

A lot of times I’ll be at the store, out shopping by myself, and I’ll be at the register. Then someone behind me will speak right over me and try to be next in line. They’ll just go up with their stuff like
I’m not there. I’m not really bold, but I always try to get eye contact.

Paul describes a recent incident when he was picking up a pizza for dinner:

And we’re just standing there picking it up and we were really close to the counter. The [average height] people were pushing and pushing—violating our space. You know, I just pushed back [and said], ‘Hey, you have to give us some room here’.

Such violations of personal space illustrate the ways in which spaces of representation, such as stores and restaurants, can be experienced differently by little people. Whereas the average-height adult may experience such places comfortably, the lived experience of these situations can lead to feelings of anxiety, disrespect or even danger for little people.

Paul and Mary feel that, during the course of going about ordinary activities, both the social and physical aspects of dwarfism affect their lived experience in public space. As they attempt to convey a public image of themselves as a normal married couple, they encounter constraints and complications during spatial practices in representations of space that are staturized for people of average height.

Paul remembers his initial reluctance before attending his first meeting:

It was my first one, it was about twelve years ago and I decided to take the first step and go and that’s when we [Mary and I] met. So, I guess the rest is history—we got married a year later.

The ‘first step’ to which Paul referred was his willingness to temporarily enter a ‘little-person world’. For some little people attending regional and national meetings can be a jarring experience. They find themselves in a situation in which they can blend, one in which they are no longer ‘different’ because of their appearance. The physical accommodations and social interactions at such meetings enable little people to move from the margins of the ‘average-size world’ to a place in the majority of the ‘little-person world,’ effectively re-staturizing spaces for the duration of the gatherings. I told the Jamisons about conversations I had with other little people who had mixed feelings about the alternative social space that LPA provides. Mary summed up the ambivalence of some little people this way:

[Some people] are real comfortable because everyone is just like them and then [others] are uncomfortable because everyone is just like them!

Mary was involved with LPA as a teenager and young adult. For her, moving between the ‘little-person world’ and the ‘average-size world’ could be difficult:

As a teen and a young adult, before I was real active in LPA and before Paul came along, it was pretty much a let down. Because you’re with your friends and you’re just hanging out all weekend and you’re totally comfortable because you’re at eye level. And then you go back and it’s back the way it was. It’s not that it was that terrible, but you’re standing out

Moving between two worlds: big and small

Little people live in spaces designed and utilized primarily by people of average height. However, since 1957 the organization LPA has given little people the opportunity to temporarily inhabit a ‘little-person world’. Each year, hundreds of little people gather for a national convention that produces a temporary alternative social space. Paul and Mary are active members of a regional chapter of LPA and began dating after meeting at an LPA function.
and you know you stand out in the crowd—not having anyone, even your parents and family can’t quite understand all that you experience. Unless you’re living it, you don’t really relate.

I think it’s harder when you’re not married and you don’t have a family that’s little to come back to. I think it’s nice to be able to come home and he (Paul) knows what I go through and I know what he goes through.

These initial responses to being in a large group of little people suggest that the experience requires spatial adaptation on various levels. The accommodations made for little people at the convention hotels take away the frustrations they frequently experience in spatial practice in the ‘average-height world’. In part, this is a result of the re-staturization of the hotel for the duration of the convention. Consequently, that particular hotel undergoes a transformation as a representation of space. While usually intended for people of average height, it becomes a space intended for little people. They are genuinely welcomed, accommodated and they dominate the space for the week of the convention. Hence, the hotel becomes an enjoyable space of representation simultaneously.

Within this space, the little people in attendance are not ‘different’ or special. They experience, maybe for the first time, a situation in which they can blend. They are no longer marginal, but instead are part of a dominant majority. As part of this mainstream, they experience the same social dynamics that people of average height experience on a daily basis. For example, social interaction at LPA conventions can be a lot of fun, a bit competitive and many little people take the opportunity to look for potential romantic partners at the various social gatherings. At the social events, the fashion shows, the parties and at the dances little people have experiences that can increase their self-confidence among a group that is not impressed by their short stature.

LPA meetings continue to be an important and positive part of the Jamison’s social life. Like many little people, the Jamisons are the only little people in their community. Paul notes that LPA and especially the Internet have helped little people overcome spatial isolation:

Before there was LPA, I’d say it was harder for little people—before there was a good solid organization of little people. It’s really helpful to us. It’s therapeutic for us to go to these meetings and to know that there are other people in our situation—and to not be looked at as different for that period of time, even if it’s for a week or a weekend regional meeting like the one we met at. It’s nice.

A few weeks after our interview, Paul and Mary invited me to attend a regional LPA Christmas party. On this occasion, I was able to experience a ‘little-person world’ in which I was in the minority as a person of average height. The party included a meal served to seated members, a raffle and several games for young little people. As with my first encounter with the Jamisons, I was struck both by the physical ‘differences’ of most of the people in attendance as well as by the otherwise ‘ordinariness’ of interaction. Adults chatted with one another and greeted friends they had not seen for a while. Young children were running and playing while shy teenagers eyed members of the opposite sex. I realized, especially as I interacted with the children, that I usually associate size with age and maturity. I spoke with several children who appeared to be much younger than they were. As soon as they began speaking, I realized that I had underestimated their ages and maturity. This experience helped me to understand the complaints of several little people I had spoken with earlier who felt
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underestimated in terms of their capabilities and their maturity because of their short stature. I became conscious of my own culturally informed tendency to infantilize these children based upon their size.

The adults in attendance were from all walks of life and various occupations. At the party, I realized the degree to which little people are ‘normal’. I had the opportunity to speak with a trumpeter in a professional symphony orchestra, an accountant and a college professor—all of them little people. I found that our conversations did not dwell upon their short stature, but instead focused upon their professional lives, their families and the upcoming holiday season. Through these interactions, I understood more about the dissonance between common (mis)representations of little people and their actual lived experiences.

From the ‘little-person world’ described by Paul and Mary, I was able to imagine how such a world provided a relaxing and enjoyable environment in which they are not perceived as different, in which their social space is ‘normal’. By attending the party, I experienced for the first time what it feels like to be physically out of proportion in normal social interactions, to be in the minority within a staturized (in this case, produced by little people) space. Most importantly though, my attention to the ‘difference’ of these little people faded as I became caught up in the festive atmosphere of the party.

The Jamisons at home

In contrast to public spaces, private home spaces offer the freedom from inconvenience and unwanted attention derived from the power that little people have to design their home environments. After the interview, I was invited to the home of the Jamisons. It was in this private space that I gained a visceral understanding of how representations of public spaces are in fact ‘staturized’—that they are conceived in certain supposedly ‘normal’ spatial relationships that, if altered, lead to very different lived experiences for so-called ‘abnormal’ people. It was during this visit to the Jamisons’ home that I experienced first hand the relational nature of so-called normal height.

We entered their home through the kitchen and I immediately experienced an odd sensation of spatial disorientation. The kitchen, with all the typical accessories, was scaled to the size of the Jamisons, hence neither Paul nor Mary appeared short in this space. The counters were approximately 6 inches lower than conventional counters and, hence, I felt like a giant—out of proportion to the physical environment. I remarked about my experience and the couple explained that the effect would wear off in a few moments and it did.

As they showed me the rooms in their home, I noticed that most furnishings outside of the kitchen were of ordinary size and that picture frames were hung at average height. Paul said that they hang decorations at average height because, even to them, they look strange when hung lower. The bathroom, like the kitchen, was designed for use by these short-statured people. The sink was considerably lower than I was used to and I was conscious of leaning over to wash my hands. They showed me the closets in the master bedroom which had clothes hanging at a height easily reached by the couple. The Jamisons had chosen to re-staturize some areas in their home to increase their functionality. However, when Paul remarks about the strange appearance of decorations hung lower, he reveals that his sense of ‘normal’ appearances is derived from average-height spaces.

Both Paul and Mary were raised in house-
holds with average-height family members, hence, their representation of home is derived from the average-size homes of their childhoods. Yet several modifications had been made so that the couple could enjoy the ease of living that many homes offer. As Moss and Dyck (1996) note from their work with disabled women and home environments, the physical arrangement of home spaces, although concerned in a material sense with the ability to engage in everyday activities, are not separate from issues of identity. In this case, the Jamisons had found a balance between their home as a ‘normal’ representation of space consistent with other homes—and their home as an appropriate space of representation that accommodates their short stature. In the Jamisons’ home, spaces that are primarily functional are treated differently than spaces that contribute to the personal milieu of their private space.

Summary and implications

Hawkesworth (2001: 316) notes, ‘public consciousness of disability is “trapped” in thinking of the experience as a mobility and functioning problem’. Hence, by focusing upon dwarfisms as reflected in particular spaces and places, this paper helps to shift the emphasis away from a fixation on the appearances and (dis)abilities of little people towards an understanding of how dwarfisms are lived in socio-spatial terms. From the narratives of the Jamisons, it is clear that, for them, to live with dwarfism is to negotiate and adapt somewhat differently than many adults in a variety of spatial contexts.

In order to understand the complexity and simultaneity of the spaces of the Jamisons, Lefebvre’s spatial trialectic provides a useful approach to the conceptual and material features of social spaces. It is evident from the stories of the Jamisons that their everyday negotiation of spatial routes and networks is affected by their short stature. Furthermore, their accounts of daily activities suggest that their spatial practice is affected by dominant representations of space, observable in the built environment, based upon common perceptions of what is considered normal adult height. Their narrative tells a story of ongoing challenges—both social and physical—in the production of their social spaces. It appears that one of the main challenges facing the Jamisons is encountering representations of space expressed in built environments that are somewhat adverse for them as little people. Dialectically, these built environments often reinforce the conceptualizations of ‘normal’ height.

Unfortunately, the conspicuousness of their ‘difference’ produces spaces which, at times, degrade the quality of life for the Jamisons. Clearly, the historical spaces of ‘freaks’ linger in the minds of some, maybe many, ‘average’-height people and continue to affect the ways in which physical ‘difference’ is negatively valued in space, though LPA helps to dilute such perceptions in public consciousness. However, the Jamisons also experience spaces in which they are not perceived as different, in which their presence reinforces rather than challenges a sense of what it means to be ‘normal’. Their participation in Little People of America and the modifications of their home, for example, help them to cultivate spaces of representation in which they are not an anomalous minority. It appears that such experiences add to the Jamisons’ confidence in their ability to cope with socio-spatial discord in the dominant spaces of people of ‘average’ height.

In addition to understanding dwarfisms in a more nuanced way, Lefebvre’s theoretical framework and qualitative methodology offer to geographers and others an opportunity to
broaden the scope of their understandings of physical and social ‘differences’ as they are lived in spaces. This particular study of the socio-spatial experiences of two little people helps give a voice to a group from whom we seldom hear. Most importantly, geographers can benefit from the perspectives of little people by becoming increasingly sensitized to discourses of physical ‘difference’ and their material implications in the production of public and private spaces.

References


Abstract translations

Espaces sociaux des personnes de petite taille: l'expérience des Jamisons

Nains, nabots et même «phénomènes de foire» sont les termes utilisés pour dénommer les personnes de petite taille. Les personnes de petite taille sont des individus qui, pour des raisons génétiques ou hormonales, atteignent une hauteur ne dépassant pas les quatre pieds et huit pouces (1.42 m). En plus de faire face à des problèmes d'accessibilité similaires à ceux des autres groupes physiquement handicapés, les personnes de petite taille vivent dans des espaces pensés, physiquement et socialement, pour des gens de «taille moyenne». En outre, les personnes de petite taille doivent faire face à des stigmates uniques prenant leurs sources historiques dans la mythologie, dans les formes corporelles idéalisées et dans la commodification des différences corporelles dans un objectif mercantile. Cet article se bâtit sur les conceptions spatiales de Henri Lefebvre et sur la prémisse que les espaces sociaux sont produits. Plus spécifiquement, cet article propose le terme d'«espace staturo-configuré» (staturized space) pour décrire comment l'environnement matériel produit une stature relative dans les représentations spatiales ordinaires. De plus, j'identifie les manières par lesquelles le nanisme affecte les relations sociales lorsqu'elles s'exercent dans des espaces destinés pour des gens de taille moyenne. Finalement, cette étude décrit comment les domiciles des personnes de petite taille et les rencontres au sein de l'organisation Little People of America sont des espaces physiquement et socialement reconfigurés. La production de ces espaces sociaux alternatifs donne forme à des environnements habitatants et normatifs pour les personnes de petite taille. Ces problèmes sont abordés à travers des entrevues approfondies menées avec des couples mariés et des individus qui sont de petite taille, ainsi qu'à travers les observations des participants. L'étude de cas des Jamisons fait partie d'un projet plus vaste cherchant à révéler les aspects des espaces sociaux d'une population difficile d'accès et fréquemment in comprise. Les géographes peuvent tirer profit des perspectives de ces personnes de petite taille en devenant davantage sensibles aux discours sur la taille et leurs implications matérielles dans la production des espaces publics et privés.

Mots clés: nanisme, handicap, espace social, personnes de petite taille, Lefebvre.

Los espacios sociales de las personas pequeñas: las experiencias de los Jamison

Enano, pequeño, hasta monstruo son términos que han sido usados para referirse a las personas pequeñas. Las personas pequeñas son individuos que, por razones genéticas o hormonales no llegan a medir más de 1,42 m. Aunque las personas pequeñas afrontan la misma situación que personas con otras inca-
pacidades en cuanto a cuestiones de acceso, viven en espacios destinados, tanto física como socialmente, para personas de ‘mediana estatura’. Además, las personas pequeñas afrontan estigmas únicos que, históricamente tienen sus raíces en mitología, formas corporales idealizadas y en la mercantilización de diferencias corporales por ganancia. Este papel hace uso del concepto espacial de Henri Lefebvre y la premisa de que espacios sociales son algo que se produce. En particular, el papel ofrece el término, espacio estaturizado para describir la manera en que el entorno material produce una estatura relativa en representaciones de espacio corrientes. Además, identifica el efecto del enanismo sobre relaciones sociales en espacios destinados a personas de talla mediana. Al final el estudio describe las maneras en que las casas de las personas pequeñas y las reuniones de la organización Personas Pequeñas de América son espacios re-estaturizados tanto físicamente como socialmente. Estos espacios sociales alternativas constituyen entornos normativos para las personas pequeñas, espacios que las capacitan. Examinando estas cuestiones por observaciones y entrevistas exhaustivas con un casal de dos personas pequeñas. El estudio de los Jamison forma parte de un proyecto más grande que procura revelar aspectos de los espacios sociales de una población con la cual es difícil comunicar y que a menudo es insuficientemente estimado. Los geógrafos pueden sacar provecho de las perspectivas de las personas pequeñas por ser más sensibles a los discursos sobre talla y las consecuencias materiales en la producción de espacios tanto públicos como particulares.

Palabras claves: enanismo, invalidez, espacio social, personas pequeñas, Lefebvre.