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Behavioral Aspects

Residences should provide a safe, restful, and private places for people to live and entertain themselves and others, although unfortunately this is not always the case. They afford opportunities for a variety of pleasant and constructive social, work, and leisure interactions and behaviors, but sometimes they also shield harmful actions from public view.

Understanding how individuals act inside their residences has been a topic of housing research for many years, despite the difficulties involved in studying behavior within a private setting. Residential attitudes, such as preferences, choices, and satisfaction are more frequently investigated by social scientists and housing industry researchers because examining attitudes involves fewer barriers than does examining what people actually do inside their homes. Residential attitude studies are typically accomplished by surveying residents in public settings, such as a mall, grocery store, or classroom, by mail, or over the internet. However, modern technology allows researchers to use less obtrusive approaches to study behavior inside residences, as long as ethical principles such as informed consent are stringently followed. Some of these techniques include the timed use of different spaces within the residence, digital photographs, hand-held recording devices, and resident-narrated video tours.

This entry describes the behavior of individuals inside their residence and in its outdoor areas. It includes the behavioral tendencies of men, women, and children in the ways they use different parts of the residence, and concludes with a discussion of accessibility and aging in place.

Residential Interior Arrangements

Residences can be arranged and decorated in many ways, but these variations are not random. They are somewhat predictable from cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors, as well from the values and personality of the residents. Living rooms are usually the focus of this research because they are the main shrines and showrooms for residents. These central rooms almost always contain objects that are particularly meaningful for residents and are, at some level, meant as messages to visitors about what is important to residents.

Orderliness and organization inside residences also vary. For example, a study of single-family dwellings in California considered aspects of residents (e.g., their family type, income, and lifestyle) that may have led them to organize their interiors as they did. The homes of unmarried parents had greater disorder and functional complexity than traditionally married parents and residents with higher incomes. In Italy, a study identified five major styles of interiors, which vary in terms of their symmetry (or lack of it), conventionality or eccentricity, expensiveness of the furniture and objects, and the use

of ritual objects or not. These styles systematically varied with the residents' age, inclination toward business or intellectual pursuits, and financial status.

The Spatial Ecology of Home

People do not spend equal amounts of time in all parts of their residences. Some research focuses on who spends time where in the residence, including who may rarely or never enter which spaces. For example, children rarely enter parents' bedrooms, and parents gradually withdraw from entering adolescents' bedrooms. Marked differences are sometimes found in where men and women spend their time. Older studies (1980s) found that women reported engaging in many more domestic activities (e.g., laundry, baking) than men, who more often performed more maintenance-related behaviors at home.

Leisure Behavior at Home

Ethnographic research suggests that less than 20 percent of working and middle-class parents' time at home is used for pastime activities. Of this time, behaviors are often passive and non-interactive (e.g., watching television). Men spend more time on passive leisure activities, such as watching television in the living room, than women. Men and women engage in different leisure activities in different parts of the residence, at different times of the day, and for different lengths of time. For example, men and women both engage in leisure activities for short and fragmented periods, but men are more likely to have longer periods of recreation.

Understanding how different forms of housing can facilitate or hinder recreational behavior is important. Societal concerns about obesity, social health, and overall wellbeing provide a legitimate reason to more fully investigate how residences affect leisure behavior. Leisure activity can relieve stress and promote familial bonds within a household. For example, teens who share in-home leisure time with their parents have been found to have better general well-being. However, some home-based recreational activities can have negative effects on other behaviors. For example, adolescents who watched more television have reported feeling less oriented to intellectual and cultural activities.

Aging in Place and Accessibility

Overwhelmingly, older people and people with disabilities prefer to remain in their homes as they age. The aging population, at least in industrialized countries, is compelling designers and researchers to consider the latter portions of the lifespan in terms of housing. Also, the number of people with disabilities in need of accessible housing options is growing. Accessible design principles, also called universal design, afford less demanding and more convenient living spaces by allowing individuals with limited mobility to enter, exit, and maneuver inside a building with greater ease. Similarly, aging-in-place design principles ensure people of all ages can remain in their homes safely and satisfactorily.

Accessible housing typically includes additional floor space, wider hallways and doorframes, and adjustable fixtures, such as kitchen and bathroom counter tops and cupboards. Homes capable of adapting to an occupant's physical needs over many years undoubtedly promote the likelihood of positive behavior at home, and in the community. When such principles are adhered to in residential design, most activities in the residence can be optimized. For example, residents who use a wheel chair are better able to interact with family, friends, and their community if their residence is customized for restricted mobility. Accessible housing designs may reduce transitions to hospitals or assisted living facilities and save costs for individuals and health care systems. Research on how to utilize these designs in market housing, long-term care facilities, and affordable housing projects to enhance the physical and social well-being of aged and disabled residents continues.

Home as a Dangerous Place

Ideally, residences are a place of safety and refuge, and most often they are. However, this is not always true. For example, 64% of recent murders in Scotland occurred in residential buildings. Statistics Canada reports that 85% of all sexual or physical assaults on children are committed by persons they know; such offenses likely occur in the residence. Presumably these figures are approximately the same in other countries. Although experts debate the frequency of marital violence, it is far from rare, and it almost always occurs within a residence. Less serious negative behavioral outcomes have also been associated with residences: regardless of income level, a recent study showed that children whose residence is in poorer physical condition have more behavior problems. The design and type of residences has been linked to a variety of forms of stress.

Conclusion

One's residence should be, and very often is, a place of security, privacy, and pleasure, but it is not always. Measuring behavior in residences is more challenging than measuring attitudes about housing. Residents organize their homes differently but in ways that are predictable from their culture, values, age, income, and marital status. Men, women, and children spend more time in different areas of the residence. Leisure activities in the residence can result in closer ties and greater well-being, or be associated with isolation and obesity; not all home-based recreation is equally valuable. Accessible housing designs and the concept of aging in place are important for increasing the ability of older people and those with disabilities to remain in their homes for a longer portion of their lifespan, something that most prefer. The home can facilitate violence by shielding it from public view, but generally it serves as a restorative and pleasant refuge.

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Cross-references

Affordability; Aging in Place; Assisted Living; Home; Household; Residential Preferences; Residential Satisfaction

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