PHOBIC GEOGRAPHIES

THE PHENOMENOLOGY AND
SPATIALITY OF IDENTITY

JOYCE DAVIDSON

PHOBIC GEOGRAPHIES

Joyce Davidson provides a powerful and highly original interpretation of phobias, and at the same time helps all of us to think afresh about ordinary, everyday experiences at the boundaries between our selves and our environments. By exploring phobic experiences, Davidson sheds new light on what it means to be a gendered, embodied and situated subject.

Liz Bondi, Professor of Social Geography, The University of Edinburgh

This book does a wonderful job in weaving together a sophisticated theoretical framework with the voices and experiences of women. Each enriches the other in ways that will surely make a creative contribution to the work of a wide range of readers.

Dr Gillian Rose, Senior Lecturer in Geography, The Open University

For my mum and dad, and for Jim.

Phobic Geographies

The Phenomenology and Spatiality of Identity

JOYCE DAVIDSON

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction: Notes on Stories, Selves and Spaces	1
1 What in the World is Agoraphobia?	8
2 ‘Joking Apart...’: The Negotiation of Group Boundaries Through Humour	34
3 Fear and Trembling in the Mall: Kierkegaard and Consumer/Consuming Spaces	54
4 ‘Putting on a Face’: Sartre, Goffman and Agoraphobic Anxiety in Social Space	69
5 A Phenomenology of Fear: Merleau-Ponty and Agoraphobic Life-Worlds	88
6 Pregnant Pauses: Agoraphobic Embodiment and the Limits of (Im)pregnability	106
7 ‘All in the Mind...?’: Analysing the Subject of ‘Self-Help’	121
Conclusion: Re/solution of Spatial Identities	140
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>145</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>156</i>

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Introduction

Notes on Stories, Selves and Spaces

Robin Kearns has described one role of the geographer as a ‘teller of tales’ (1997: 269). In this book, I aim to take up this positioning in order to communicate something of the stories told by a largely neglected group – agoraphobic women – about their restricted and debilitated ‘life-worlds’ (Dyck 1995; Edwards and Uhlenhuth 1998). Agoraphobics tend to fear and avoid social space and women account for around 89 per cent of diagnosed agoraphobics (Clum and Knowles 1991; Bekker 1996), a proportion comparable to those suffering from anorexia nervosa (Battersby 1998: 46. See also Bordo 1993). But, while there has been considerable interest in anorexia by feminists and social scientists concerned to explain its gendered distribution, the same cannot be said for agoraphobia. And, although there has been no shortage of *clinical* research into agoraphobia and related anxiety disorders, these have as yet attracted relatively little attention outside of their medical and psychological contexts. This book constitutes the beginnings of an attempt to remedy these shortcomings.

My aims in this book are twofold; to provide non-clinical, specifically geographical insights into agoraphobia of relevance for its sufferers, and, complementarily, to expand human geography understandings of the relations between gender, embodiment, space and mental health, via a study of agoraphobia. It will be argued that, through its quest to fulfil these aims, the project reveals innovative potential in terms of both *therapy* and *theory*.

Therapeutically, I suggest that a study conducted from a feminist geographical perspective can improve existing models of agoraphobia, in ways that could have valuable implications for treatment. Existing treatment models tend to be based on clinical and psychological research and literature that is necessarily limited by particular disciplinary concerns, focused around, for example, bodily symptoms, or learned behavioural responses. I argue that a critical geographical perspective is better placed to take account of the importance of wider social contexts and relations, and can give a fully spatialized account of the disorder more faithful to the way sufferers actually describe their experiences. It may thus go some way toward providing agoraphobic subjects with the means to re-conceptualize, re-articulate and possibly re-structure their problematic relations with the social world.

Theoretically, I would suggest that an investigation of agoraphobia can address and expand some of the core themes of human geography, such as geographies of gender, of women’s fear, of disability and impairment, mental health and illness, and of embodiment. By drawing attention to some of the more unusual ways that people relate to each other, and to their environments, we can illuminate some

ordinarily taken for granted aspects of personal geographies. People and places are intimately interconnected, they shape and affect each other, and I argue that a condition like agoraphobia emphasizes, exaggerates, and has the potential to elucidate this dialectic.

The voices of agoraphobic sufferers that emerged through my ethnographic interventions have impacted substantially on my textual approach to the subject and subjects of agoraphobia. This reflexive process had effects that ramified far beyond methodological considerations (see chapter 2) affecting both the theories used and even the final structure of the book itself. So, although the general trajectory of this book is *from theory to therapy* it also records some of the revisions and re-envisioning of these theoretical insights in the light of my increasing familiarity with subjects' own stories and through the need to relate such abstractions to their everyday experiences.

In each chapter, theoretical problematics and experiential stories are identified and brought together to explore certain aspects of agoraphobic experiences. Some chapters deal with 'philosophical' issues that seem very far indeed from most people's everyday concerns, yet in every case I try to link these theoretical considerations with sufferers' embodied experience of a world perceived by them to be an intensely problematic place. While each successive chapter calls upon its predecessor to elucidate the nature of agoraphobia, each also has a quite different thematic dimension. Each explores an issue that emerged through respondents' comments as related or relevant to their condition in ways that may not be immediately obvious (for example, stories about supermarkets, or about pregnancy). In this way, chapter by chapter, the book also follows what might be termed the 'adventures of the dialectic' between people and places as previously unforeseen aspects of this relationship are incorporated into an increasingly grounded theoretical framework.

However, before this process could even begin I faced an initial difficulty in choosing a theoretical starting point capable of being adopted and adapted to account for the relation between agoraphobic subjectivities and social spaces. This was made doubly difficult by the fact that, as respondents' stories made obvious, agoraphobia is not a definitely bounded condition but an amorphous, complex and varying 'cluster' of fears experienced in different ways and in different social circumstances by sufferers (Marks 1987: 324). Nonetheless, despite the intensely personalized nature of each experience, and the apparent lack of a single causative factor, research reveals certain networks of similarities running through this condition. For these reasons Isaac Marks, a clinical psychiatrist writing prolifically for professional and lay audiences on this subject, is amongst those who prefer to refer to agoraphobia as a *syndrome* (1987, esp. ch. 10; see also Gournay 1989).

One way of envisaging the sheer diversity of experience and 'stories' encountered in my studies on this agoraphobic syndrome is in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of a 'family resemblance'. This conception enables us to avoid the tendency to reify particular aspects of the agoraphobic experience as 'essential' characteristics present in all cases. Wittgenstein points out that there does not have to be a single common identifying feature in order for us to recognize the relationship between family members. We recognize their affinity by

the various networks of resemblances between them in terms of items as varied as 'build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc.'. So too, when comparing the experiential accounts of agoraphobic subjects, we find 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' (Wittgenstein 1988: 66). Each has their own nuances, their own phenomenology (vertiginous, visual, bodily, emotional), aetiology (architectural, existential, social, psychological) and so on. We may find, for example, agoraphobic *tendencies* to respond to certain kinds of spaces and places in one (perhaps fearful and avoidant) way rather than in another (more 'positive' or protected). We will not find, however, universal reactions to any location or situation, not even those as apparently clear-cut as 'homes' or 'funfairs'.

Crucially, this complexity and diversity of experience strongly suggests that the study of agoraphobia would benefit from the kind of multi-faceted *theoretical* (geographical, sociological, philosophical) as well as methodological approach employed here. In this way we might tease apart some of the constitutive fibres of the agoraphobic syndrome before we attempt to reweave them into a meaningful pattern. This is precisely what the book attempts to do chapter by chapter. Just as 'the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres', so the explanatory strength of any eventual theoretical synthesis will lie in extending the 'concept of [in this case, agoraphobia] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre' (Wittgenstein 1988: 67).

Perhaps the most persistent pattern that emerged as one story became woven with another was a picture of agoraphobia as a disorder that problematized sufferers' experience of themselves as bounded and well-defined entities, as individual(ized) subjects. This experience is crystallized in the panic attack(s) that all respondents (without exception) had experienced in some form prior to the onset of their condition (see chapters 1 and 2). Panic, as I will argue throughout this book, is experienced as an unbearable attack on one's sense of self in space, constituting an unmitigated existential threat. That is to say, it destroys one's sense of relatedness to other people, and locatedness in place, alienating the subject from the practices of everyday life.

In describing these attacks and their subsequent repercussions sufferers frequently utilized complex spatial imageries that referred to their felt inability to control the boundaries between 'inner' subjective and 'outer' social worlds. Many spoke of the way space seemed to intrude on their consciousness and/or a feeling of their own self-identity's dissolution and dispersion, of a confusion, vertigo and intense anxiety that emanates from the sudden feeling of lacking a secure ground for their existence in the face of panic. Concentrating on the phenomenology of what appear to be accounts of a 'boundary crisis' seemed to offer a novel geographic approach to agoraphobia as a disturbance of subjects' otherwise taken-for-granted ability to mediate the relation between subject and social space. It also suggested that a possible theoretical starting point for thinking through this relation might be found in the accounts of existential anxiety presented by thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

Existentialism, as a philosophical tradition, not only deals directly with the relation between anxiety (*Angest* for Kierkegaard, *Angst* for Heidegger, *Angoisse* for Sartre) and existence, it also offers detailed accounts of the inseparable relation between person-hood and place, what Heidegger articulates in a single term as our 'Being-in-the-World' (Heidegger 1988).¹ For Heidegger human existence is characterized as *Dasein* – quite literally as a 'there-being', where 'being' is a verb – an activity, namely, existing. Thus the relation between place and person is not characterized in terms of those between a ready-formed subject and their 'objective' environment. Rather, the nature of our existence is such that we are always, already, gathered together in (as) a locus. 'Being-there' is more like 'being-*the*-there'. In Giorgio Agamben's (1991: 5) words, 'being its own *Da* (its own there) is what characterizes *Dasein* (Being-there)'. Or, we might say, human existence is about being able to constitute oneself *as* (in) a specific place. This obviously opens up all sorts of possible connections for geographies of the subject. And, while Heidegger's own work does not feature prominently in this book, the processual nature of this work also traces and testifies to my own intellectual engagement with the existential tradition, from Kierkegaard through to those heavily influenced by Heidegger, like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

To reiterate then, while each substantive chapter has a separable thematic content, the book generally moves from theory to therapy. It also follows the unfolding development of the existential and phenomenological tradition in its movement from the more esoteric and subjectivist existentialism of Kierkegaard, through the socially grounded work of Sartre, to the explicitly spatial and embodied and inter-subjective account of existentialism presented by Merleau-Ponty. In this way the book also moves from abstract philosophical arguments about the human condition *per se* to a more nuanced feminist geography capable of accounting for the diversity of experiences of agoraphobia and its gendered relations to particular times and places.

Chapter 1 of this book is devoted to a critical review of the various bodies of literature deemed relevant to this enquiry, a review intended to highlight a number of gaps that this project seeks to address. By critiquing existing understandings of agoraphobia, I will begin to introduce the kind of theoretical and conceptual resources that are required for this project, feminist, phenomenological, existentialist, etc., a discussion that prepares the ground for presentation of my experience of actually *doing* research on agoraphobia in chapter 2.

Chapter 2 focuses in particular on the negotiation of one's positioning in relation to respondents. My experience reveals that, no matter how carefully such issues have been thought out in advance, the subjects of our research may have ideas and plans that do not coincide with, and effectively thwart, our own. The chapter explains how one group in particular presented a degree of 'resistance' to my role as temporary group member, resistance that was enacted through humour, but which was taken seriously enough to prompt the emergence of an alternative, 'processual' approach to the project. My manner of involvement with groups was thereafter a continual 'work in process', my 'method' an evolving response to subjects' 'jocular' policing of the boundary between insider/outsider status. The course of action this chapter outlines was thus intended to enact (and accept)

positional change according to shifting dynamics between and among researcher and researched.

As outlined above, the shape of this book partially embodies the processual unfolding of my theoretical interactions with the subject(s) of agoraphobia. Chapter 3 presents my engagement with one predominant experiential theme in relation to an early existentialist appraisal of human being. In particular it focuses on the phenomenology of the panic attack (characterized in terms of an existential crisis) and its relation to social space. The social spaces that recurred most frequently in women's narratives were, perhaps unsurprisingly, those associated with the everyday (and gendered) activity of shopping. This chapter therefore draws on and develops existentialist insights to help articulate something of the inherently spatialized nature of agoraphobia in order to investigate why consumer spaces, and shopping malls in particular, should present such a substantial threat to many sufferers' boundaries and self-identity. Despite what one would imagine to be the relatively trivial place of 'shopping' in an existentialist worldview, I argue that the (psychological²) works of Kierkegaard can be utilized to explain why consumption should present sufferers with difficulties. Sufferers' debilitating experiences of such consumerist 'pathoscapes' are contrasted with their largely positive experience of the home, a space often perceived to be protective, rather than corrosive, of the agoraphobic's sense of self. This contrast is intended to underline one inescapable outcome of this research – that selves and spaces impact on and interact with each other.

Chapter 4 continues this existentialist exploration of the self/space dialectic, and shifts the theoretical focus from Kierkegaard to Sartre, examining the latter's account of the centrality of Angst to our being-in-the-world, again in close relation to respondents' own tales of social and spatial anxieties. In particular, it considers subjects' fears of being unable to maintain self-identity in the face of the 'look' of others, and their means of handling such experiences. In a move toward recognizing the importance of therapy for this book, it is argued that the techniques of 'front management' and 'self-presentation' posited by Goffman can be regarded as a form of coping mechanism for dealing with the anxieties of social existence outlined by Sartre. Further, that one, potentially useful way of understanding agoraphobia might be as a failure to utilize these coping mechanisms. By thus bringing sociological insights to bear on this existentialist approach, the chapter suggests that sufferers might benefit from re-learning how to use particular coping mechanisms to strengthen their weakened and fragile boundaries. In this way, it underlines the increasingly socially grounded nature of existentialist approaches to being human in contemporary society.

In chapter 5, I call on Merleau-Ponty to further extend the exploration of the nature of agoraphobic fears of social spaces, focusing particularly on the phenomenological implications of these fears for spaces of the self. Merleau-Ponty highlights both the mediating role of sensations in acquiring a sense of identity, and the importance of recognizing the social (as opposed to merely individual) construction of lived space. Perhaps even more importantly his work critiques and provides an alternative to dominant Cartesian presuppositions of mind/body dualism, for Merleau-Ponty the self is not only social but is inextricably embodied.

This chapter thus provides a vital link between existential accounts of being-in-the-world and 'being embodied' that become the focus of theoretical and therapeutic concerns in this and later chapters.

The second part of chapter 5 addresses the potential relevance of this approach for sufferers from agoraphobia through a specific case study that serves to emphasize the embodied nature of agoraphobic experience. Inevitably, this strategy means that we come to know 'Linda' rather better than the other respondents in this book. However, the intention behind this approach is not to claim that Linda is somehow a typical agoraphobic (since no such 'typical' person exists) or to marginalize other respondents' accounts – some of whose experiences are also presented in some detail throughout the book. Rather, Linda's individual story in this chapter is intended to provide a particular insight into her agoraphobic experience(s), helping to draw out and illustrate the implications and importance of a 'spatial understanding of mental health', the links between phenomenological and existentialist approaches, and the limitations of Cartesian mind/body dualism. Focusing on the personal narrative of just one individual also allows therapeutic concerns to begin to emerge from theory through what might be termed an 'existential analysis'.

Chapter 6 further develops the book's increasingly geographical, and explicitly feminist take on existential phenomenology. Calling on Sartre's insights regarding objectification (chapter 4) and the account of Merleau-Ponty advanced in chapter 5 it seeks to draw out some of the project's thematic fibres relating to a gendered phenomenology of embodiment and bodily boundaries. In particular it explores possible connections between the gendered 'conditions' of pregnancy and agoraphobia by linking my own work with Robyn Longhurst's recent research on the embodied experiences of pregnant women in public places. There are, I suggest, commonalities and possible synergies between pregnancy and agoraphobia since both can be interpreted as entailing severe disruptions to bodily boundaries and might usefully be seen as experiential intensifications of the problems associated with maintaining a stable sense of self-identity by women. In both cases, subjects experience a heightened awareness of socially problematic aspects of womanhood, and raised sensitivity to the feeling of being 'out of place' in the public sphere.

The last chapter completes the grounding movement from theory to therapy and draws us back into the research context itself, namely the self-help groups that remain the methodological focus of the project. The purpose here is to begin to suggest ways in which a feminist geography of agoraphobic existence might elucidate generally overlooked aspects of issues regarding sufferers' treatment. In particular, it suggests how an analysis of self-help resources from the perspective developed within this book might offer new insights and different possibilities for recovery. While self-help resources are often overlooked and undervalued in academic studies they actually constitute an important part of sufferers' attempts to mitigate their condition. However, such texts are far from unproblematic, since they often presuppose a notion of the 'self' that is overly, and often overtly, reliant on the individualistic, yet internally dualistic Cartesian concepts criticized by this book. By critiquing this limited and limiting Cartesian notion of self, and

questioning what self-help resources of a more inclusive hue might look like, I offer an account of subjectivity more sympathetic to the 'unusual' spatial relations encountered here. This perspective is also less likely to pathologize agoraphobic experience. This chapter thus begins to rethink spaces in, of and around the self that have been explored and entwined throughout the book, and highlights the unacknowledged centrality and influence of existential philosophies for 'real world' situations.

In 'conclusion', this geographic story attempts to draw together the various strands that have contributed to this re-telling of tales about agoraphobic life-worlds. There is no singular 'meta-narrative' here, no intention to encompass the totality of individuals' experience within a restrictive and reductive framework, but rather, a collage and collection of 'minor' (Katz 1996) stories told around particular themes from particular perspectives, one that amounts to a (re)composition of agoraphobia, and potentially also, of agoraphobic subjectivities. There may be no clear end in sight to many of the tales told here. The theses I put forward are only steps on the way toward an understanding of agoraphobia, steps that will almost inevitably include the occasional wrong turn. As for agoraphobics themselves, their lives frequently seem to be part of an ongoing saga, one that I have come to realize, often requires great heroism in fearful circumstances.

But what is important in any tale is that it should offer some hope, a hope that can only emerge by providing insights into the nature of our being-in-the-world, into what Hannah Arendt (1958) calls *The Human Condition*. Agoraphobic narratives express both something general about this condition, in terms of exposing our underlying existential anxieties and something very specific about the gendered geographic particularity of women's positioning, their 'there-being' in the modern world. Agoraphobia makes explicit Arendt's (1958: 184) claim that 'nobody is the author and producer of his [sic] own life story'; it highlights the implicate order of our embodied existence in social spaces. But in doing so it also offers the hope that through understanding agoraphobia's implications the possibility arises of an analysis of, and a therapy for, the self (and society) that might help alleviate some of the symptoms of this particularly debilitating condition.

Notes

¹ 'That which anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the-World itself' (Heidegger 1988: 232).

² *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* are aptly enough called Kierkegaard's psychological works' (Hannay 1982: 157).

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