

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

By

Emily Stier Adler

As a retired professor, my local Y has become an important place for me for social interaction. When I had a young family and worked full-time, I felt so pressed for time that I could just about fit in one volunteer activity, participation in a few social groups and a once a week walk with a friend or time at a gym. Life was too busy and full of social interaction to think about adding anything else. But once my children left home and I retired, I felt the need to replace some of the social interactions provided by family members and work colleagues.



after retirement (Adler & Clark 2015). For example, those with more years in the labor force were more likely to pursue part-time paid work after retirement than those with fewer years. Similarly, those who volunteered while in the labor force were most likely to continue or add to volunteer activities after retirement. Those who had not volunteered were unlikely to start despite expressed expectations to do so. I find these patterns to be true for me. Post-retirement, I taught one

Studies about which I had taught, on the effects of the quality and quantity of social relationships on mental health, morbidity and mortality (Holt-Lunstand et al. 2010), now became relevant to me. I know from my own research using continuity theory that people typically make only moderate changes in their activities

college-level course per year, continued to do research, added two volunteer activities and joined or helped to create several groups. A few years before retirement, I became a grandparent which also provided important new opportunities for a variety of social interactions.

The biggest change I made after retirement was to gradually increase my hours spent exercising at the local Y from two hours to 15 hours per week. One by one, I added a variety of group classes. While the physical benefits of exercising are important, I have found the social connections equally important. I have realized that the local Y is my “third place.” While I am fortunate to have a healthy spouse, grown children with families and a significant number of friends, I am grateful to have a “third place” as part of my social landscape.

In his classic book *The Great Good Place* (1989), Ray Oldenburg identifies the first place as the home, a place where we live most of our lives and usually remain after we leave the workplace. The second place, the work setting, may reduce individuals to a single productive role and provide the means to a living, but can also provide social interaction. The “great good places” or “third places” are the “homes away from home” where unrelated people can congregate for pleasurable time together, often with no specific purpose in mind (Oldenburg, 1999:xv). These third places are typically accessible to the general public, do not set formal criteria for membership or exclusion and regard outside status as unimportant as, in the ideal, all participant are seen as equal. Moreover, third places can be seen as neutral ground, places where one is neither host nor guest that can serve as sorting places to bring

people together. Finding those one likes or with whom one has things in common is often the starting point for later associations (Oldenburg 1999:xviii).

Many elders have sources of social engagement and recognize the benefits. In the United States, 24% of those over 65 engage in one or more volunteer activities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016) with improved health and psychological well-being documented (Hidalgo et al. 2013). In addition, 20% of all preschoolers are cared for at least part time by grandparents (Laughlin 2013) with the great majority of grandparents providing at least some grandchild care (Luo et al. 2012). The grandparents Michele Hoffnung and I interviewed (Adler & Hoffnung 2019) described the joys of caring for grandchildren including the rich social connections it provided. For others, friendship networks, membership in groups and extended kin gatherings provide social engagement and positive outcomes for life satisfaction.

Third places can be important to retired elders even if they have other social networks. In addition to helping people stay connected, third places can have a community-building function if the interactions strengthen ties within communities via informed public discourse (Jeffres et al. 2009). In the public realm, a third place can provide a space where diversity can be comfortably experienced (Oldenburg 2008).

While I greatly enjoy the social interactions and the support I give and get from my spouse, my friends, the groups and organizations to which I belong, my volunteer work and my connections to members of my extended family, my local Y has become especially important for social interaction. While I did have to join and pay an annual fee, available need-based membership scholarships make it appropriate to classify the Y as a third place.

But third places don't just happen. Over the past few years, I have learned to introduce myself to many co-participants and, as result, I know the names and a bit of the social history of between one and ten people in each of my group exercise classes. Some of them have become good friends over time. While I am white and over seventy as are many of my co-participants, my friends include women who are African American, Latina, immigrants from India and China and those in other age cohorts, both younger and older. In this third place, most days, I can show up and enjoy some conversation with a diverse group of individuals. One of the benefits, as Oldenburg notes, is that the social interaction occurs with no commitments or responsibilities as either host or guest.

Published more than thirty years ago, Oldenburg's

concept still has great validity although his list of third places needs updating and his definition can be expanded. He included bars, cafes, coffee shops, community centers, barber and beauty shops, general stores, drug stores and post offices. His work calls to mind the bar presented in the television sitcom *Cheers* (1982-1993). In the Cheers bar, people of different social classes (although all white) were able to socialize easily in a place where "everybody knows your name."

More recently, Jeffres et al. (2009) focused on third places using data from a national probability sample phone survey of American households. One question asked was "What are the opportunities for communication in public places in your neighborhood, for example, places where people might informally chat or where friends and neighbors might go for a conversation?" Twenty nine percent of the respondents could not think of any place in their community where they would go. Coffee shops, named by 13% of the sample, were the most common third places identified. Next most common were community centers, churches, parks and outdoor recreation areas, neighborhood places like streets and yards, clubs and organizations and libraries. One important finding was that the perceived presence of third places and the perceptions of neighborhood quality were positively correlated.

Some researchers have suggested that libraries (with or without food and beverages) can compete with Starbucks and its clones to be third place (Harris 2007; Coppola 2010). While the numbers of Americans who attend meetings at their public library has decreased in recent years, Americans still believe that libraries are important to their community, their family and themselves. Two thirds of all of those 16 and older said that closing their local public library would have a major impact on their community and one third felt such closure would have a major impact on them or their families (Pew Research Center 2013).

The internet provides on-line third places for some. McArthur and White (2016) argue that regularly scheduled Twitter chats can function as digital third places -- sites of online sociability that both mirror and deviate from physical gathering sites such as bars or clubs. Pew Research Center data (2001) found virtual communities (i.e., online groups that connect people with common interests without any concern about distance) play an important role in users' lives.

Facebook is the most widely used social media platform with some 69% of U.S. adults using Facebook (Pew Research Center 2019). However, email, social networking services such as Facebook and instant

messaging may promote “glocalization” in that they can be used as frequently to maintain nearby core social ties as they are to maintain more geographical separated ones (Pew Research Center 2009). Public spaces, such as parks, libraries, community centers, restaurants, coffee shops and other “third places” discussed by Oldenburg, continue to be meeting places for social interaction *often in conjunction* with on-line social media. For example, compared to those who did not use the internet, internet users were 42% more likely to visit a public park or plaza and 45% more likely to visit a coffee shop or café (Pew Research Center 2009).

To see if my experience of third places resonated with others, I asked a non-random group of retired and healthy elders all living independently to tell me about their social interaction. Twenty-eight people (eight men and 20 women) shared their experiences. All described one or more places where they typically interact with others at least once a week. After defining third places and asking if any of those they listed fit the definition, three quarters identified one or more as third places.

The third places listed were varied although the most common were religious organizations, exercise classes, sports venues/activities (i.e. golf, tennis, pickle ball), book groups and volunteer activities. Mentioned at least a few times were standing dates for lunch or coffee in restaurants, groups that meet for games (i.e. scrabble, trivia, mah jongg), several kinds of clubs, continuing education classes, musical groups and senior centers. Some indicated that a modification of the definition was needed for inclusion. Example of this were groups that met once a month in a library (less frequent but open to all), organizations or clubs one must join to participate (golf clubs, discussion groups, church groups and the like) and those that have some requirement (such as being able to sing to be in a choir or groups where members have obligations such as hosting once a year).

While two thirds of American elders use the internet and 40% have smart phones (Pew Research Center 2017), the use of digital or on-line options as third places was limited in this sample of adults. Only five of the twenty-eight mentioned on-line third places, most frequently Facebook. For those without third places, most did not want nor need a third place. For them, their families, friends, social activities and the like, were enough. One noted that he rarely feels the need for any additional places to connect with others; another said that her time was filled with chosen friends in more private places and for now has all the contacts and friends she can accommodate.

Almost all the third places listed had a primary goal

with the social interaction that developed coming from propinquity and shared activities. While taking a Zumba class, going to a gardening, knitting or book club, playing a game of scrabble, tennis or golf, participating in an educational experience or working on a volunteer project, the interaction with other participants sometimes came to include as one noted “conversation, support, laughter and friendship.” Another commented that the third place helped to form “a network for sharing ideas and a sense of community.”

Just as doing volunteer work, working part-time for pay, keeping in touch with friends and family have all been recommended as ways for elders to stay healthy, mentally and physically, I suggest that third places are equally important. While a discussion of architecture, social policy and urban development that can encourage third places is beyond the scope of this essay, I note examples of places to emulate. Chicago’s Cultural Center is open to all and offers many free visual art and performance programs each year. Plazas and beaches like the Inkwell beach on Martha’s Vineyard (Peters 2016) can encourage people to exercise and socialize together. Parks and even park benches can promote positive social interaction (Sagrero 2018).

Although it would be good to have many third places and supportive public policy, when pushed, individuals can create them. I leave readers with one example. When asked about life in his Pensacola, Florida neighborhood, Ray Oldenburg described his dismay at his neighborhood in a subdivision. “It’s got privacy built into it like you can’t believe. I thought, why do we even have sidewalks? There’s never anybody on them. . . [So] I converted our two-car garage into a bar, created my own third place. I lucked onto a genuine mahogany cabinet and stocked it with liquor. The refrigerator is full of beer, there’s a little wine fridge, and so on. I don’t like to drink that much anymore but I like to think I’m a decent host. We have regular hours, Wednesday and Sunday. All sorts of people come over: the library staff at the university, a brother-in-law, a retired physician and many others” (Oldenburg 2008).

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About the Author: Emily Stier Adler, Ph.D. is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Rhode Island College. Her passions are Zumba, Pilates and yoga. Her research interests include retirement and grandparenting. She and psychologist Michele Hoffnung are the authors of *Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents Share Advice, Insights and Experiences* (2019) available in paperback and as an ebook.