Birds of a Feather: The Jewish Retirees of Boca Raton

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Whenever I tell fellow Northeasterners that I am venturing down to Boca, I inadvertently employ an ironic tone as if to say, *of course* my Jewish grandparents are in Boca part-time, and we seem to share an unspoken joke about the stereotypes of the community and a warmhearted, yet "it is what it is" attitude, about their existence. But what actually are these stereotypes, and to what extent do the residents of Boca embody them? And, as this is a relatively recent phenomenon, how did all the Jewish retirees end up there, and how do they fill their time? At the root of these questions rests the broader one of how do the Jews of Boca approach and cope with retirement? Such were the queries I had in mind as I made the journey to my grandparents' gated community of Broken Sound in Boca Raton, Florida – a place I had visited many times before, but never with an attempted level of objectivity and a discerning eye.

Over the course of a week in Broken Sound, a 20-year-old community with 1600 homes (see map in Figure 1), I observed the lifestyle, engaged with the residents, and reflected on the experience of a predominantly Jewish, retired community located in an area frequently stereotyped around those characteristics. My conversations occurred by the tennis courts, in the adjoining fitness center, in the main clubhouse, and out to dinner with my grandparents' friends. Despite my grandparents' well-intentioned introductions ("this is our granddaughter, she is doing a project on us for university and she wants to *interview* you"), I tried to keep the conversations casual, the encounters natural, and achieve a balance of one-on-one chats and group discussions. Broken Sound's population is 73% Jewish and most of my informants fall under that category. I spoke to a mixture of "snowflakes," who come for three months or less, "snowbirds," who spend roughly half the year there, and full-time residents, most of who had gone through the previous stages

Figure 1: A map of Broken Sound – 27 mini-communities with names like "Whisper Trace" and "Fairway Landing," the main clubhouse and tennis complex, with waterways and a golf course weaving throughout.

before settling permanently. The only formal interview I conducted was with the Irish General Manager, in order to obtain logistics about the community and the perspective of an outsider in charge of, as he declared, "maintaining the culture of the club."

At the root of my findings are the universal issues of life transitions and aging, yet most existing ethnographies around such notions seemed to contradict my own. This largely spurs from the fact that this sort of lifestyle is a recent (and Western) phenomenon; people are living longer and retirement has therefore taken on new meanings. Whereas disengagement in later life has been prominently written about, my findings undoubtedly fit under a re-engagement heading. In conjunction with this notion of re-engagement, Atchley's gerontological 'Continuity Theory' (1989), which has intrinsic ties to functionalism, elucidates the experience of Broken Sound most accurately and profoundly. Atchley asserts that "in the everyday lives of adults in their 50s, 60s, and 70s there is a great deal of continuity over time in skills, activities,

environments, roles, and relationships…We find older people using familiar skills to do familiar things in familiar places in the company of familiar people…This continuity is not a boring sameness for most but rather a comforting routine and familiar sense of direction" (1989: 188). Continuity theory has internal and external dimensions, both of which "help individuals focus on and maintain their strengths and minimize the effects of deficits as normal aging occurs" (1989: 186). While this may be a common thread through ethnographies of retirement, I found an unparalleled experience in Boca simply because the skills, activities, environments, roles, and relationships that they simultaneously perpetuated and transformed were unique to the individuals of that community, and many of them unique to the Jewish American experience. This is ultimately a reflection of the fact that ideas of old age and retirement are culturally constructed (Savishinsky, 2002).

External continuity is manifested through "a remembered structure of physical and social environments, role relationships, and activities" and is driven by a "desire for predictable social support" (Atchley, 1989: 185-186). I will first examine the continuity of physical and social environments, which for the people I spoke to are deeply interlinked; though their physical environments have changed, the change has been gradual and aided by social relationships. Furthermore, the internal migration from the Northeast to South Florida has its roots in the history of the Jewish American experience, which must be recognized to understand the environmental continuity of Broken Sound, Boca Raton, and South Florida at large at the moment I encountered it. The significance of background research became apparent when Alan, one of my informants, noted in passing how "it wasn't a long time ago when no Jews were allowed past Miami." Given that South Florida now has one of the highest populations of Holocaust survivors in the world and the third-largest Jewish population in the US (Greenbaum, 2005), I realized I didn't just need to discover why my particular informants chose the new, yet familiar physical and social environment of Boca, but also when, why, and how this trend began in order to make sense of them in the greater narrative.

Substantial internal migration of American Jews from their Northeastern urban hubs was not enabled until after World War II, when "the destruction of the European Jewry shattered the familiar contours of the Jewish world and transformed American Jews into the largest, wealthiest, most stable and secure Jewish population in the diaspora" (Moore, 1992: 102). Consequently, when federal policies such as the GI Bill allowed many Americans to seek better lifestyles outside urban centers, this reinvigorated collective identity led the American Jewry to migrate via ethnic networks. Miami attracted an increasing population of retirees, many of who were part-time residents, leading to the introduction of the term "snowbird." Then and now, the term represented "more a state of mind than a reflection of behavior" (1992: 108). Moore's comments on the early Miami migrants hold true for the Jews of South Florida today:

> "The move to Miami represented less a decision to leave the familiar urban world of their past than an attempt to radically extend its boundaries. Jews dubbed Miami 'the southern borscht belt' and joked that it had become a suburb of New York City. Their humor underscored the sense of connectedness that the newcomers felt with their old homes, which denied the radical character of their relocation" (1992: 109).

> Furthermore, "as Jewish New York…and Philadelphia represent continuity with a European past because they were created by immigrants from the cities and towns of Eastern Europe, so Jewish Miami…[was a] creation of the…northeastern cities, representing continuity with an American past" (1992: 113).

Reduced anti-Semitism, the mortality of the first migrant retirees, increased affluence of American Jewry and, correspondingly, the development of country-club like retirement communities further north (such as Broken Sound) led the influx of Jews to Miami come to a standstill around 1980, and communities like Boca to serve as new ethnic hubs. And these hubs took off at a rapid rate – in the 1990s, Palm Beach County housed the fastest-growing Jewish community in the country (Sheskin, 2005). The original

continuity of place persisted, however, and still serves as the backbone of the South Florida Jewish retiree community today. No matter the percentage of time spent in Florida or "back home," the latter is largely what constitutes people's conceptions of place and allegiance. Gail, a petite snowbird with whom I chatted as she speed-walked on the treadmill, asserted that she will always consider herself a New Yorker. The transition isn't perceived as a drastic environmental shift because, as the "snowbird," "snowflake" terms represent, the change in both literal place and mindset happens gradually. As Alan explained over dinner one evening, "First we came for a weekend, then a week, then a month…it happens to everyone. But we would never be down here full time." So said my grandparents not so long ago, yet during this trip they admitted that they had begun to talk about selling their house in Connecticut and making Boca their primary residence.

Such continuity of metaphysical place is underscored by continuity of the social environment, a trend that began with the first retirees as they created "a voluntary community of peers" (Moore, 1992: 109) and fuels the migration today. Indeed, there would be less continuity of environment if one stayed in the Northeast during the winter, because their social environment would be transposed to Florida. The rapid development of the Jewish community occurred via a "chain migration process" that persists today wherein "potential migrants from the Northeast visit friends or relatives in their South Florida homes. They soon migrate to South Florida, with their friends/relatives assisting in their adaptation to their new environment" (Sheskin, 2005: 8). The connections to "back home" remain because all of your friends and same-generation relatives from "back home" are in Florida too.

This process that Sheskin identified is reinforced by the testimonials of my informants. Sitting at the Courtside Café with my grandfather's tennis group one morning, they all agreed that friends and family had initiated their transition. Lenny, for example, was coerced into coming down by his wife's brother and they built two houses side by side. Jackie, with whom I spoke in the clubhouse golf shop, summed up this social-physical environmental continuity quite concisely: "Retiring here wasn't totally

deliberate, we came for one month and then three and now were here six months of the year. We made more and more friends; it was a gradual transition, it happened organically, so that we didn't even think to retire elsewhere."

"Having learned throughout their history that mutual dependence is necessary in order to insure group survival" (Lemish, 1981: 29), Boca is a place where the Jewish community can rely on each other. As Gail said, in contrast to her New York City home, "Friends here are much more accessible. Everyone is caring, nurturing and involved. It's a family who have come together." She also claimed that Judaism is a huge factor in her social relationships. Yet this support system extends to non-Jews too. Joseph, a Catholic man from Croatia, was particularly eager to tell me his story. After first immigrating to Chicago, he eventually started coming down to Boca because the sea reminded him of Croatia, where he still spends every summer – another example of physical environmental continuity. The other factor in his migration was his own continuous relationship to the Jewish culture. While in Chicago, he worked for a Jewish man for 30 years who gave him a chance and treated him like a son. Therefore, he told me, "I have a great appreciation and respect for the Jewish people. I enjoy the company they offer and being around the Jewish sentimentality." Likewise, the Irish Catholic GM expressed that after having worked in Jewish country clubs for 25 years, he feels surrounded and protected by the community – they "always make sure your needs are taken care of. I don't know if that happens in every culture."

This brings me to the cultural side of Judaism that I have always connected to, and one of my motivations in studying the community. I feel much closer to my Jewish grandparents than my Protestant ones, neither of whom are very 'religious,' yet I attribute this closeness with their Jewishness – their emphasis on family time, the unconditional and overt displays of love and generosity, and the insistence on making sure everyone has a full belly. These are obviously not religious tendencies, which is why I like to call myself 'culturally' Jewish. I associate this cultural Jewishness not only with my grandparents, but also with Jewish grandparents at large, and therefore consider Boca a large community of such welcoming folk. In this project I wanted to get

to the root of this intuitive cultural Jewishness, and see if the rest of the community of Broken Sound, both Jews and non-Jews, felt it too. Given the accounts of my informants, it seems that they certainly do. Their accounts, and my own, reinforce the notion that "to understand Judaism, you must experience it" (Hurvitz in Moore, 1994: 273). It is no wonder, then, that the retirees of Broken Sound have immersed themselves in this family of friends. Additionally, if "the closest any identification can come is to view the Jews holistically as a culture" (Lemish, 1989: 28), then this culture poignantly underlies the community.

The other elements of external continuity, role relationships and activities, are inherently connected in the Broken Sound experience. They are also embedded in the new conception of retirement as a time to stay healthy and get active that the community promotes. One informant, Rick, even told me four criteria for retiring in Florida: you must be financially able to do it, healthy enough to enjoy it, happily married, and social enough take advantage of the camaraderie. However, there are still set boundaries for when and whom you socialize with; 'tennis buddies' rarely go out to dinner with their wives, and business acquaintances of the past remain on professional terms. In fact, my grandfather didn't consider sports 'socializing' at all. Whether or not the other men he plays with shared this sentiment I had no means of finding out; while interacting with them as a group, no one would freely admit that he only considered the other men 'tennis friends.' Their behavioral patterns, however, reflect the demarcation of individuals and respective activities. This differentiation of social roles is significant, because it not only perpetuates social boundaries but also provides residents with a sense of purpose and order. If, as Savishinsky (2002) asserted, "underlying [retirement] is the basic challenge of balancing freedom with responsibility" (5), then this lifestyle provides residents with the feeling that they are at "adult day camp," as Linda, a full-timer from Long Island called it, without losing all sense of control.

Such grounding and gradualness are crucial when the period of retirement is undoubtedly, as Linda's husband put it, a *mishegas*. This is a Yiddish word for craziness, which he used in reference to the "rebirth" of coming to Florida and the feeling of being

newlyweds all over again. “Starting over at our age is a tough thing,” he mused, “but the community is preprogrammed to have a good time and it’s successful.” This ‘preprogrammed good time’ consists of constant stimulation and platforms on which to stay busy, healthy, and happy: tennis groups, golf groups, art shows, theme nights and holidays in the clubhouse, and opportunities to enroll in evening lecture series at a nearby university. Images from Broken Sound’s website (Figures 2-4) demonstrate how this formula is actively promoted. The most interesting comments on this notion came from a friend of my grandparents’ who chooses to go to Fort Lauderdale rather than Boca six months of the year for this very reason. He also intrinsically links this formula to the perceived homogeneity of the community. “Boca is like a ghetto – strike that – Boca *is* a ghetto,” he joked over dinner at an Italian restaurant halfway between the two areas. “Fort Lauderdale is eclectic, whereas Boca is homogenous. The formula there works for some, but its not for us.” Although he and his wife are Jewish, they have chosen to eschew the norm that many of their friends have reinforced. The GM, the man essentially controlling this formula, said, “Boca has had the ability to attract, obviously, an ethnic group of people. I don’t know why Jews from the Northeast decided Boca was the place. But because it’s the place, our market is that. And we’re going to keep feeding it.”

This perception of Boca as a “ghetto” (i.e. a Jewish quarter) leads me to the dimension of internal continuity, which Atchley defines as “the individual in relation to a remembered inner structure, such as the persistence of ideas, temperament, affect, experiences, preferences, dispositions, and skills” (1989: 184). Internal continuity is essentially about identity. While the continuity of skill-sets and functions is quite clear

Figures 2-4: Images from Broken Sound's website promoting a lifestyle of "elegance, recreation, and friendship."

cut – a former surgeon who had never painted before, for example, epitomized how "continuity can support creativity" (1989: 188) with his astoundingly accurate

reproductions of photographs at an art show in the clubhouse because of the pre-established meticulousness of his hands – the greater issue of Boca residents as caught between stereotype and reality has a more complicated role in the construction of their identities and self-perceptions. If, as Cohen (1984) theorized, "a people's traditions express its own insights into how people *ought* to behave, ought to age, ought to retire, ought to treat one another and nature if they are to survive" (248), does the American Jewish tradition dictate that retirees *ought* to go to Florida? Or rather, does the stereotype that all old Jews go to Boca contribute to people's conscious or unconscious decisions when navigating the phase of retirement, making Boca seem like the intuitive choice if their identities are to remain socially legitimate?

As Savishinsky (2002) noted in his own ethnography of retirement, "in every culture…images and stereotypes of the life course can take on a life of their own." Therefore, "a deeper understanding of retirement and aging in modern culture demands [the] same level of attention…to actions as well as ideas, to both the real and ideal in the human condition" (4). The meaning of this statement for Boca is multifaceted. First, there is the general 'Boca as a ghetto' and its residents as 'old migrant Jewish birds' stereotype embedded in popular culture and the rhetoric of those familiar with the Jewish American experience. These are Jerry Seinfeld's parents, both fictitious and real – "they didn't want to move to Florida, but they're in their seventies and that's the law," he says in *SeinLanguage* (1993: 173) – Sarah Silverman's "The Great Schlep" during the 2008 presidential election, in which she instructed liberal Jews to "get their butts down to Florida" and encourage their "Nana, Poppa, Zadie, or Bubbe" to vote for Barack Obama (Youtube, 2008), or even @JewBoyProblems', a popular Twitter handle, recent proposition to "RT if your grandparents are migrating up north for the season #Snowbirds" (2012) as the Florida winter season comes to a close. My informants were acutely aware of such stereotypes (though probably not Twitter) and didn't seem to mind being identified with them; the Seinfeld quote was originally dictated to me by David, a snowbird from Philadelphia, upon being asked why he came to Boca.

Then there is the stereotype that Florida is the place where old Jews go to die; in other words, 'God's waiting room.' This is the justification that Leslie, a friend of my grandparents' who resides in Connecticut full-time, uses to explain her decision to opt out of the Boca trend. The Jewish factor aside, this is a reflection of a common mindset that regards retirement as a period of gradual disengagement from society (Jacobs, 1974). This theory of disengagement has become increasingly outdated, however, and my informants were keen to disprove it with their active and re-engaged lifestyles. As the GM said, "If I'm in God's waiting room, then it's a pretty cool place."

For starters, the median age in Boca Raton was 45.4 in 2010, and households with residents over 65 represented roughly one third of the population (US Census Bureau, 2010). Rather than disproving the area's identity as a popular retirement destination, these statistics reflect the changing face – and age – of retirement. For people of a particular socio-economic status, which many middle-aged and older Jews fall under, retirement is becoming more of a choice than a legal regulation, and Florida is becoming more of a place to maintain one's health than to soak up the sun before the ultimate demise. Therefore, the GM told me, the time when people begin the "snowflake" step has been getting increasingly younger, and Broken Sound sees the 45-60-age bracket as their new target. As for older residents further along in the process, Lenny proudly informed me of his 90-year-old friend who just had a stroke, but was already back on the golf course. "Even if they're on walkers or canes," he said, "they're still out there." Likewise, my Nana likes to say, in contrast to Leslie's assertion, that Boca is where people go to live.

The stereotypical story of Boca certainly plays a factor in its residents' self-conceptions, some reaffirming and some negating; there is plenty of comedic material that 'writes itself,' but there is also evidence on the contrary. While generalizations of retirement and old age may be increasingly refuted, it seems undeniable that many American Jews still choose to spend the latter portion of their lives in South Florida, and that the stereotypes of the southern migration will continue to be fed. What's important to shed light on, then, is what actually fuels this choice and perpetuates the

trend. These are the so-called “golden years” of people’s lives, so at the end of the day, for people who have worked many years to have the financial means to live almost anywhere in the world, why do they choose Boca? Does Boca offer an easy “one-stop” solution of how they want to spend their time and with whom? Does the value system they have from the North manifest in Boca in a way that leads to a “utopian” life in the South? As with any group of complex individuals, the answers to these questions vary greatly. However, I attempted to grasp at least a portion of the realities and nuances of the Boca experience, and it seems that for many, the answer to the above questions would be yes – the ethnic network, ‘preprogrammed good time,’ and gradual familiarity of the lifestyle and migration to Boca makes it a simple choice. Ultimately, this is a story about human nature and the comfort of the familiar amidst the *mishegas* that comes with any period of transition, and a reflection of the individual, societal, and cultural dimensions of aging.

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