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Place Attachment, Place Identity and the Development of the Child's Self-identity: Searching the literature to develop an hypothesis

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Introduction

In this chapter, I would like to use a specific argument about place and identity (encapsulated in the title) to offer a generalizable example of how to use published literature to develop and formulate one's research hypothesis. When starting off, one may either feel that one's new idea will have no predecessors, and thus ignore 'standing on the shoulders' of other thinkers; or alternatively, one may be awed by the amount of research which exists, and wrongly presume that there will not be room for one's own contribution. For practically any area that you might think of, if you search the literature, you will probably find already existing research which is relevant; but it is also likely that you will not find exactly the thoughts that you are pursuing, or the application that interests you. So there is, indeed, a need for your research to take its place alongside the existing work, and to fill in one further part of the wall of knowledge.

How to start? Do not assume that you can search the library or use a web search engine with just your terms of reference in mind. Think what synonyms and associated terms might lead you to fellow researchers' work; free associate around the initial idea. Equally, do not presume that relevant articles will all be found within just the one discipline or area: by the time you finish the chapter, think back to this point, and see where the trail has lead. My whole point is to tempt geographers to look beyond Geography!

How to go about scanning articles? When reading a research report, you will find that it often has, in addition to a title, several key words listed to help in your search, followed by an abstract which will enable you to check beyond the title and key words for relevance. [In my own area, I may find 'environment' or 'architecture' jumping out from titles, only to find that the terms are being used in completely other ways than those I need.] Having found those interesting and relevant articles, then get a general idea of the line of argument, rather than at first getting bogged down in the study's details [these can come later if necessary]. Many journals help you to do this by putting these details in smaller print! Take notes as you go [but again, of main ideas only at this stage]. And always make a note of authors, title and where you found the article. [I have wasted more time than I care to admit chasing back on incomplete references, when if I had taken care when first finding an article....] Fairly soon, even if you find the whole process bewildering to start with, a pattern will emerge; and you will find articles cross referencing each other, or mentioning some obvious 'ancestor' reference that sounds like you should seek out. Indeed, other people's reference lists at the end of articles can be an excellent source of further leads. But do not get obsessive: develop a feel for knowing when enough is enough for your purposes. [You are not about to write an encyclopaedia!]

Keep a notebook or file for the project and, if that is your way of working, perhaps a graphic diagram of interconnections that are emerging. And make a running log of your own thoughts

about what the literature says about your own particular area of interest. Sometimes the omissions are as interesting as what is down on the page [remember the Sherlock Holmes story about the Dog that didn't Bark!]. These may reveal the assumptions that the author or whole area may have, but which you might not share. [Often, if you are a professional teacher, your classroom experience will have you saying: Yes, but....]. Use these professional insights to develop testable hypotheses: ideas, which go beyond anecdote. Anecdotes may be good starting points for new ideas, but often they are about the exceptional, not about the usual: so ask, under what conditions...?

What do I mean by 'testable hypotheses' and what would count as a test? What kind of study would lead to my being able to suggest firm and generalizable statements? What kind of data, quantitative and qualitative, should I look to? Here again, the literature will help, but should not have you so constricted that all you do is an exact replication of someone else's study.

Now to my example.

- Ask yourself: Why are we **all** geographers?
- And what value has the subject within education?

Most of the defences, the *raisons d'être* for geography and its teaching that we customarily mount against the philistine horde are, quite understandably, couched in terms of the importance of the subject matter we deal with, from local-place studies through to an understanding of geopolitics and conflicts between nations over resources. We talk, again quite rightly, about the transferable skills that the study of geography develops: from observation and recording through analysis of findings to presentation of an argument; and the evidence-led scholarly approach to issues and questions.

Without wishing to take any of this away, I want to argue in this paper that, in 'doing geography' with the child, one is participating in a process which is even more fundamental and therefore more important still: namely, one is in a humble way facilitating the child's very personal development of self-identity which will shape much of their lives, their values, sense of belonging and self-worth.

A little bit about identities: social- and self-identity

If we were first meeting, you and I, it would be natural that we would introduce ourselves ... but how would we do it? Probably, having given our name, we would select from a whole possible array of self-descriptors, part of the social identity. Which we selected would probably reflect the context of the meeting: if aware of our common educational interests, we would most likely give our institutional affiliation. But had we been first meeting with other parents at the school gate, it would be more likely be: "Hello: I'm Tom's dad" [fill in the blanks as appropriate]. Encountering each other as 'Brits' Abroad in some touristy place, almost certainly home town, region, etc., would be early-mentioned. [Although perhaps without the vigour with which Americans-abroad seem to pursue that particular self-presentation!] And indeed, were you to be asked to write a little bit about yourself for some reason or other [again fill in the blanks here: for a job application, for the lonely-hearts advert in *Private Eye* or whatever], you would be selecting some parts of that social identity, probably carefully crafted for the purpose in hand. But in that self-presentation or description, I think its also quite likely that you would start including more personal descriptors: not only would you like the world to know that you are

from Bakewell, have a nice job and good prospects, but also that you have a GSOH...and all the other very positive acronyms which you flatter yourself that describe you.

Who you are and how you think of yourself are linked but not at all the same: publicly ascribed social identity and personal identity have an interesting relationship with each other, and with experienced well being. If our aim as people concerned with children's development and well-being, it is probably worth spending just a little time talking about how social and personal identities develop, and how they relate to well-being, health and fulfilment. Here, we do not have to speculate: there are good research literatures for each

How do social identities develop? The social psychologist Henri Tajfel (eg 1981) saw social categorisation as the pivotal mechanism in the ways people relate to each other: we see people in terms of their perceived social group membership, and react to them accordingly. In a way, it is how stereotypes work: we see the 'typical member of a group' rather than an individual when we first hear of someone, or first encounter them. Tajfel demonstrated that it takes minimal information about someone [and the group they belong to] for us to start attributing characteristics to them. In many cases, social groups do have a long history [think Loyalists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland]; but one can easily demonstrate the very beginnings of an in-group/out-group identity by allocating groups of strangers to one or other 'team' by something as obviously random as a coin-toss, and then getting them to describe a 'typical person' from own 'team' and comparing them with a 'typical person' from the other 'team'. Frighteningly, instead of saying that we are all just alike, or that they cannot judge, people are willing to see 'own' as in some way 'better' than 'other'. And if allowed, they will differentially allocate rewards between 'own' and 'other' group members (Tajfel, 1981)

So in a way we see who we *are* as being defined by those we *are not* [and often as a result feel superiority to]. And just as with social identity and how it develops, so there is an extensive literature on personal identity and its development: not only from developmental psychologists and educationalists, but also, more profoundly, from philosophers

Daniel Dennett, the philosopher suggested that a human being first creates – unconsciously [the way a spider creates a web] – one or more ideal fictive-selves and then elects the best supported of these into office as her Head of Mind. A significant difference in the human case, however, is that there is likely to be considerably more *outside influence*. Parents, friends, and even enemies may all contribute to the image of "what it means to be me", as well as – and maybe over and above – the internal news media (Dennett, 1981). He continues that we are almost constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves, and hence *representing* ourselves – in language and gesture, external and internal. "*Our* fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is ...telling stories – and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are"(109).

So what if we ask, what is a self? Since Descartes in the 17th Century we have had a vision of the self as a sort of immaterial ghost that owns and controls a body the way you own and control your car (Figure 1). Personal identity as a product of others' opinions, as described by Daniel Dennett, is an idea with a long ancestry: as for example G H Mead's concept of the 'looking glass self' in sociology (Mead, 1934). The idea that self (and later identity) is formed mainly on the bases of information attained from other people got its full power in the symbolic interactionist theory (Mead, 1934). However, the self is not a passive acceptor of feedback. Instead, the self actively processes and selects information from the social world the concept of identity process refers to a phenomenon extending from the deep unconscious roots of a person's

psyche via shared intra-group stereotypes to the 'outside' of social and personal identities imposed and/or perceived by the public.

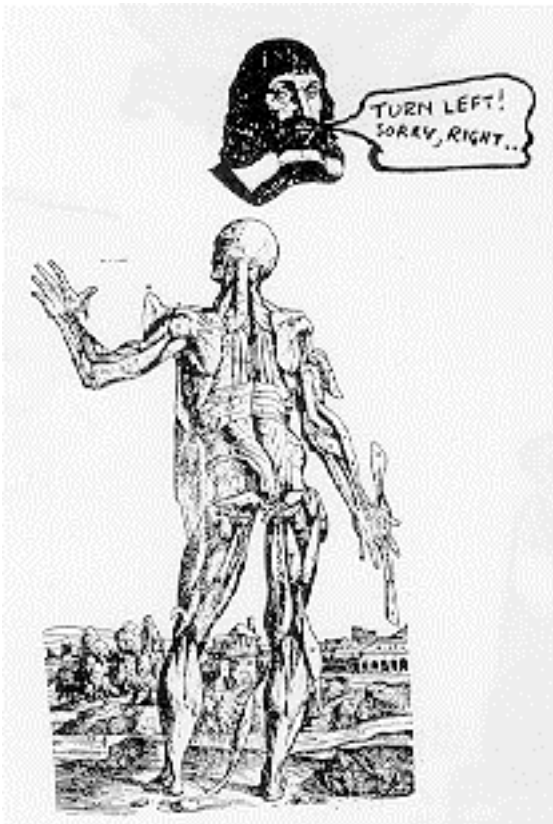


Figure 1: The Cartesian representation of self

Developmental psychology has however not always followed this 'social' line: for instance, George Butterworth (see Butterworth & Harris, 1994) constructs a plausible explanation for the origins of the self in infancy. Breaking from a long history of ideas that formulates both the definition of the self and the origins of the self in social and cultural terms, Butterworth argues that the self exists prior to, and perhaps independent from, social experience. According to Butterworth, the self is directly perceived without cognitive mediation as part of sensory information related to body movement: "the self originates in the fact that we are *embodied*." (Butterworth & Harris, 1994,102)

So how do place attachment, place identity and the development of the child's self-identity link?

The geographically-inclined reader will by now have become impatient. *Nothing* of what we have seen of the literature on self and identity has, as yet, mentioned place explicitly: *but this is the point, this is where geography fits in!*

So far in this chapter, we have seen the individual developing their identity as a member of a group, gaining social identity from the contrasts between own and other groups; as an individual,

being shaped by others' responses to them as an individual; and from a biological self-awareness from infancy. So it is indeed striking that nothing much is said in the standard accounts of self, in either social or developmental psychology, about *place* as part of the shaping of self and identity; though in many cases social group identity may include places as identifiers of social group distinctiveness ['We are the boys from the Bronx'].

But continuing in our survey of existing literatures on self, we find that there *is* a new and cohering literature from *environmental psychology* on place attachment.

Place Attachment

We find in this literature that environmental psychology does see *place attachment* as integral to self-definitions, including individual and communal aspects of identity; it therefore follows that disruptions threaten individuals' self-definitions. Place attachment would seem to function by providing the individual with a sense of stability amid change. Place attachments involve the individual's behaviour, cognition *and* affect, and they may operate at several levels of scale.

The early definitive text for environmental psychology has been Altman & Low's book, *Place Attachments* (1992). This is a collection of essays on a whole miscellany of topics, including children's attachment to places; and the importance of childhood places as remembered in adulthood – valuable chapters by Louise Chawla and by Clare Cooper Marcus, each of which summarises many studies.

Chawla (1992) describes four traditions within the literature she reviews: *psychoanalytic theory*, which has a surprising amount to say about the role of places and things within their social context; *environmental autobiographies* sieved through memory for their significance; *behavioural mapping* which records where children and adolescents congregate; and *favourite place analysis*, derived from interviews, essays and drawings. She offers a useful developmental sequence of the types of places which feature with increasing age.

Cooper Marcus' (1992) chapter then amplifies the adult memories category, reminding us that for many individuals, their most powerful memories revolve round places. As she notes, these might be the house where they grew up, the secret places of childhood and adolescence, "the setting where they first fell in love, the neighbourhood where they established their first home, the dwelling where they raised their children, the summer house they built in the woods, the garden they first nurtured" (87). She has collected hundreds of 'environmental autobiographies', essays by adults about their most fondly recalled significant places of childhood: it is clear that these earliest places remain powerful images into adulthood. Three categories of remembered places predominated in her sample's essays:

- purpose-built adult spaces, such as culverts, shacks or porches, taken over (one could almost say subverted) by children for their own use;
- hiding places, moulded out of the natural landscape, such as nests, dens or lairs;
- places specifically constructed for play, such as forts and tree houses.

Adaptation and creation of places would seem to be a significant dimension for many adults recalling childhood places, an observation consistent with the various published studies of children's actual patterns of use of their neighbourhoods: eg the classic studies by Hart (1979), Wood (1985), Moore (1986), Torrel (1990), etc., in which behaviour mapping meets almost a street anthropology of childhood. Happily, there is now a second wave of such studies to keep

us in touch with what children actually do and what they value: notable amongst which is the many nations study of urban children's activities and participation co-ordinated by Chawla (2002); and the new British studies of the rural experience by Tucker (2003). [See also: Matthews, 1992; Hart, 1997 on children's participation, and the volume edited by Spencer & Blades, 2002, summarising recent work on children's environments in three continents.]

How can one prove that, above and beyond favourite and vivid memories of childhood, attachment to places is actually important to the development of self and security? One way one can often demonstrate the effect of a factor is by looking to 'breakdown' situations, and seeing what is their effect. Thus, the Altman & Low book (1992) includes several such chapters where own place has been disrupted or even violated. In it, Brown & Perkins (1992) review the literature on various ways in which disruptions of PA can take place. A summary of these follows.

Burglary: there are reports of often severe reactions to the intrusion itself, revealing "how many victims had been caught off guard, mistakenly assuming that home is a safe extension of self that is both stable and under the resident's control" (285).

Voluntary re-locations (eg going to college) seems a less severe but still potentially significant factor: a combination of 'losing' home and having to rapidly acquire new place-knowledge leads for more students than will admit to it to levels of homesickness. How disruptive the re-location will be would seem to relate to prior loosening attachments and obligations to home; and the extent of anticipating and connecting with new life.

Involuntary disruptions: eg refugees from disasters: not surprisingly may well have major consequences for psychological well-being; and studies of those who cope best with such disruptions often stress their efforts to establish new identities; or alternatively to re-establish identities reminiscent of the old identities among the exiled groups.

But as we know, people do manage to survive these disruptions; and one way they do it is by bringing a little bit of 'home' with them. As an example of the *importance of objects in transitions between places*, the Taiwanese psychologist Heng-Dar Bih (1992) interviewed Chinese postgraduate students who had been in New York for one semester in 1992. He showed how important certain physical objects, both old and new, were to the person's adjustment in their new setting. He suggests that the importance of objects can be categorised as follows:

- objects have more than functions: symbolic meanings may accrue from eg: "Who gave this to me?";
- objects may manifest values or ideals: religious items; professional symbols (eg a business suit);
- objects as an extension of memory: eg photographs of key people and places; old diaries;
- objects for deepening experience: eg a cherished tea-set, which gave warmth and peace;
- new objects, representing desired changes in role and attachments;
- objects as a place of release from the alien environment: maintaining cultural continuity.

[There is a whole further literature on the psychology of place as 'home': this will not be reviewed here, but to see how it could link with our current concerns, see for example the work of Manzo (2003, 57):

“My research interests have focused on people's emotional relationships to place. I have explored concepts of place attachment and place identity in an effort to learn about the kinds of places that are meaningful for people, the role these places play in their lives and the impact they have on people's identity and well-being. I have sought to understand the foundational, existential qualities of being "at home" in the world and to learn about what places support this way of being. Traditional understandings of home have focused on the residence and positive affect. My research seeks to broaden that understanding to include a wide range of places and to incorporate the role of negative and ambivalent feelings and experiences in places to appreciate the full magnitude of people-place relationships.”]

From this kind of evidence, of disruptions and of repairs and copings, one can see how the case for arguing the importance of place attachment in personal well being and self-identity can be made. We now need more work, both with adults and with children, which examines the nature of the relationships with place [eg are there desiderata for the elements of place for us to become attached to, or is it a case of the familiar becoming positively evaluated whatever its nature?]. We also need to sort out the definitional muddle that has existed in this area.

Some thoughts towards a definition

For some time, the main difficulty the researcher has encountered when dealing with the study of place attachment has been the diversity of approaches available at the theoretical level as well as the empirical. There was no agreement regarding its name, description or the methodological approach best suited to deal with it. There are many similar terms such as community attachment, sense of community, place attachment, place identity (Proshansky, Ittelson & Rivlin, 1976), place dependence (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981), sense of place (Hummon, 1992), etc., such that it is often difficult to tell whether we are talking about the same concept with a different name or different concepts. On occasions we see that one of the terms is used as a generic concept which embraces others [for example, for Lalli (1992), place attachment is a component of place identity]. On other occasions some authors use them without distinction as if they were synonyms. This terminological and conceptual confusion has seriously blocked advances within this field as many authors have pointed out (eg Lalli, 1992).

Currently, there seems to exist a certain consensus in the use of the term 'place attachment'. In general, place attachment is defined as an affective bond or link between people and specific places (Tigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). For example, for Stokols & Shumaker (1981, 233) it is 'a positive affective bond or association between individuals and their residential environment'. Hummon (1992, 256) considers it 'emotional involvement with places', and Altman & Low (1992, 165) describe it as 'an individual's cognitive or emotional connection to a particular setting or milieu'.

These descriptions may be appropriate to describe this special feeling toward certain places, but they have the drawback of being too ambiguous and do not allow us to differentiate attachment from other closely-related concepts such as, for example, residential satisfaction, which has been described as 'the positive or negative feeling that the occupants have for where they live' (Weidemann & Anderson, 1985). For this reason, we consider it necessary to further delimit it. Towards this aim, we fall back on what we understand to be the main characteristic of the concept of attachment: the desire to maintain closeness to the object of attachment (see Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2002). This characteristic, although is implicit in many definitions and operationalizations of the concept, has rarely been explicitly emphasized. If we incorporate this

specific property into the previous definition of place attachment, it could take the following form: a positive affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such a place.

We can only find one description of place attachment in these terms, although under a different name. Sarbin (1983) speaks of the Spanish term *querencia* which reflects the frequently observed tendency of people to prefer to stay near to specific places. It is the propensity of human beings and other animals to seek out the place where they were born or find a place in which they feel comfortable and secure. However, with the exception of this author, rarely has place attachment been described in these terms. On the contrary, many other aspects have been incorporated in its description, for example, the role that attachment plays in the development of identity, its influence on the sense of community, etc. In our opinion, these other aspects are not inherent to attachment or definitive, but the tendency to stay close to the object of attachment is.

But it is clear that the plausible, intuitively persuasive, case for the importance of place in the development of a complete, rounded self-identity has begun to be made. And it is also clearly arguable that the subject of geography, and its early-years teaching, can have a major role to play in partnership with parents and peers and personal exploration of the neighbourhood. If, as Catling (2003) has argued most persuasively, geography teaching starts from children's own geographies, rather than being a slave to theoretically driven curricular, then I would argue we have a really strong argument for the importance of geography teaching in the enhancement of personal well-being (see also Spencer, 2003; Roberts, 2003; Valentine, 2003). One could also make a parallel case for its importance for the sense of community and citizenship, and one moves the focus from individual well-being to that of the wider social world of the child: but that is a whole further literature!

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