

Place Attachment

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CHAPTER 7

“Beyond the Commodity Metaphor,” Revisited

Some Methodological Reflections on Place Attachment Research

Daniel R. Williams

The year 1992 was a watershed for research on place attachment. Not only was the landmark book *Place Attachment* (Altman & Low, 1992) published, in that same year some colleagues and I published “Beyond the Commodity Metaphor” in the journal *Leisure Sciences* (Williams et al., 1992). Our paper was not intended as a methodological contribution to place attachment measurement. Rather it was an effort to reframe the study of outdoor recreation experiences around the notion of “relationship to place” as an alternative to modeling it as a multi-attribute consumer choice, or what we called “the commodity metaphor.” Yet because the paper introduced one of the first psychological scales for measuring place attachment as an affective bond, that scale has been widely applied in place attachment studies and adapted for use in many different kinds of places.

Previously I have argued that place research is not a single research tradition and unlikely to cohere into a widely accepted trans-disciplinary theory (Patterson & Williams, 2005). Place represents a basic subject matter of interest to virtually all the social sciences, humanities, and even the natural sciences. This diversity has contributed to a great deal of confusion about the many methods social scientists have used to investigate people–place relationships. To better understand some of the methodological choices and issues, my goal in this chapter is to revisit early thinking that guided place attachment research and reflect on the methodological implications for current research. In particular I want to highlight two early themes that still shape research methods on people–place relationships as a central topic within environmental psychology. One is the increasing preference for the term *place over environment* as the focal subject matter in human–environment studies. The other is the often blurry distinction between place as a locus of attachment and place as a center of meaning.

Early Origins in Place Research

Not unlike the field of environmental psychology as a whole, place attachment has eclectic origins with correspondingly diverse philosophies of science and methodological preferences, which emerged from various critiques of modernism, science, and epistemology dating to the late 1960s. First, many trace the development of place research to the emergence of humanistic and critical geographies

as anti-positivist reactions to mainstream geography's emphasis on place as little more than location and container of human action (Peet, 1998). Consequently in some approaches to place there is a built-in aversion to quantification (Relph, 2008). Second, some date the first work on place attachment back to sociological concerns about the presumed decline or dissolution of community and neighborhood in modern society (Fried, 1963), particularly as a consequence of forced displacement and high residential mobility (Giuliani, 2003). Third, some note the influence of various psychological, social, and cultural critiques of cognitive information processing theories of the mind (Bruner, 1990) in which the environment is reduced to stimulus information rather than a locus of meaning. Fourth (and most influential on my own work), some have raised criticism of instrumental models in environmental planning and management, which viewed the environment as a means for promoting behavioral and economic goals to the neglect of more deeply felt sentiments, symbolism, and identities tied to places (Stokols, 1990).

Two early epistemological influences on my work on relationship to place came together at the University of Utah in the mid-1980s. First, Irv Altman began to explore contextual and transactional perspectives often neglected in psychological research. Accordingly, "a transactional approach does not unilaterally impose measures on an event, but it derives them from the event. What generalizes from study to study is not the measure, procedure, or technique but the construct and theory that underlies the research" (Altman & Roggoff, 1987, p. 35). Some of the earliest examples of applying this perspective can be found in a series of studies of neighborhood attachment conducted by Altman's Utah colleagues (see Brown, 1987) and it was central to his approach to place attachment as an integrating concept (Altman & Low, 1992, p. 4).

The second influence came from Russ Belk's (1992) work on symbolic consumption, attachment to possessions, and his concept of the extended self. Not only did his work challenge the instrumental, information model of consumer choice in favor of a "meaning-based" approach, it helped to launch an epistemological turn in consumer research which opened up the field to a wider range of methods including hermeneutics and phenomenology, forms of consumption including hedonic consumption, and meanings associated with the objects of consumption (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Much like consumer research, the field of natural resource management was strongly anchored in a commodity metaphor in which outdoor recreation was examined as a consumer choice analogous to other goods and services associated with forests and wildlands (e.g., timber, water, forage). According to the commodity metaphor outdoor recreation places were considered substitutable so long as they supported similar experiential goals. The emergence of a meaning-based perspective in consumer behavior was critical to moving beyond the commodity metaphor, expanding the methodological playing field in natural resource management, and sparking my own engagement with qualitative-interpretive methods for examining place meaning (e.g., Patterson et al., 1994).

One facet these early influences on place research seem to have in common is that they recognize place as a holistic entity to be valued as an end in itself rather than a malleable collection of attributes and features with separable

and independent utility. Russell and Ward (1982, p. 666) were among the first environmental psychologists to differentiate the study of place from traditional environmental perception studies, suggesting that places "are experienced in large part in terms of their social and symbolic meaning ... as a whole rather than as a succession of parts" and thus "provide a profound challenge to the study of place perception, since places are so unlike objects, the traditional focus in perceptual research." In assessing the philosophical views of people-environment studies, Stokols (1990) similarly distinguished an instrumental perspective focused on measuring the quality of environments based on how well they promote important behavioral and economic goals from what he called the spiritual view in which place quality is measured in terms of the richness of its psychological and sociocultural meanings. Over time environmental psychology has extended its early focus on environmental perception and cognition studies in which the environment was seen as a constellation of instrumental attributes to include an expanded perspective in which the environment is seen as an end in itself where research seeks out "contextually rich, and spatially and historically specific, understandings of places" (Williams & Patterson, 1996, p. 507). This has important methodological implications as much of the debate about methods has to do with how one understands the difference between characterizing relationships to various properties of the environment versus relationships to specific holistic entities that we think of as places.

Another important legacy of these early efforts was a dualistic conception of place as both a locus of human attachment and a center of meaning. In an early review of the emerging field of humanistic geography, Entrikin (1976, p. 616) noted how place was defined "as a center of meaning or a focus of human attachment." Likewise in sociology, one can go back as far as Firey (1945) for an analysis of places as locations of both sentiment and symbolism. Although exploring both aspects simultaneously—and even additional aspects of places such as the social and political processes that construct and contest them—seems possible (Dixón & Durrheim, 2000), contemporary studies investigating place phenomena differ considerably in the extent to which they focus on attachment versus meaning and correspondingly employ quantitative versus qualitative methods. Consequently place attachment research is often described as divided between quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., Lewicka, 2011). However, this is at least partly a failure to clearly distinguish studies of attachment from meaning and it continues to plague the methodological clarity of place attachment research and place research more generally.

To begin to clarify the methodological challenges in place attachment research it is helpful to distinguish two uses of the term *place attachment*. One refers to a specific operational construct designed to measure the emotional intensity or strength of attachment (place described as a locus of attachment). The other refers to the broader psychological processes of attachment formation and meaning making (place described as a center of meaning). Thus beyond characterizing the strength of emotional bonds, investigators also assess a variety of other meanings someone might hold for a place (e.g., from tangible concrete meanings to the intangible symbolic meanings) and the extent to which those meanings are individualized or shared. In sum, whereas attachment is focused on the measuring

emotional intensity of bonds, examining place meaning is more broadly directed at understanding the psychological role, function, and processes underlying place relationships.

Place as a Locus of Attachment

The most studied aspect or type of relationship to place has been place as a locus of attachment with consequent attempts to quantify the strength of bonds to places. Again, much of this work originated in the 1960s as urban planners began to recognize that people exhibited sentimental ties to neighborhoods, especially after being displaced (e.g., Fried, 1963). Consequently much of the early work on place attachment was focused on residential places drawing on data from large social surveys. Attachment was typically measured using proxy variables or behavioral indexes such as length of residence and satisfaction and for the most part did not measure affective bonds directly. This began to change in the late 1980s with my own research investigating attachment to recreational places (Williams et al., 1992) as well as the development of a number of multi-item measures for assessing residential attachment (see Giuliani, 2003).

Trained in natural resource management, my interest in place attachment began by exploring a qualitative distinction between "functional" orientations to places (e.g., their perceived capacity to meet specific recreation goals) versus "symbolic" or "expressive" orientations to places (e.g., how places represented identity and cultural values) using personal construct theory and repertory grid techniques to elicit place meanings (Williams & Schreyer, 1981). Building on these early efforts I began to work on developing a psychometric instrument that could measure the strength of place attachments for use in management-directed public surveys of visitors to places like national parks, forests, and tourist destinations (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989). Important inspiration for developing the scale came from Brown's (1987) review of territoriality in which she identified two primary conceptualizations of place attachment (i.e., place dependence and place identity) that seemed to reflect the functional versus symbolic dimensions embodied in my earlier investigations. The basic design of the two-dimensional scale was refined in a series of studies (Williams & Vaske, 2003) and prompted others to investigate further similar constructs such as belongingness and place bonding as well as the dimensionality and the psychometric properties of place attachment (e.g., Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Kyle et al., 2005). The two primary dimensions—place dependence and place identity—remain widely discussed themes throughout in the literature on place attachment (Giuliani, 2003; Lewicka, 2011).

At the same time research in environmental psychology continued to focus on measuring the strength of residential and community attachments and identity (for reviews see Giuliani, 2003; Lewicka, 2011). Some of that work began to differentiate place attachment from place identity by drawing from various theories of identity within social psychology, including social identity theory and identity process theory (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003).

As place attachment measures have moved beyond behavioral indicators such as length of residency and frequency of visit, most methodological development

has been in the direction of self-report measures of affective bonds and the specification of underlying dimensions (Lewicka, 2011). When defined narrowly as an affective bond, place attachment seems quite amenable to psychometric methods for measuring individual differences in a fairly consistent manner across many specific and varying types of places. Within this specific context, methods have advanced to a point where there is some convergence on core dimensions (dependence and identity), although additional dimensions such as social bonds continue to be explored (e.g., Kyle et al., 2005). Some measurement topics that would benefit from greater attention include methodological studies to improve the sensitivity of the scales and to evaluate their ability to differentiate within-subject variation across multiple places (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Other methodological issues involve how to measure and compare attachment at different spatial scales (e.g., home, neighborhood, and region) and the extent to which measurement strategies can be standardized or need to be tailored to different contexts such as residential, visited, or even imagined places.

From a measurement perspective the key operational concept is an emotional or affective *bond* and it is methodologically important to differentiate place bonds from other kinds of affective experiences and judgments common in environmental psychology. One example is aesthetic experience, which has often been defined as an "innate" response to a stimulus and as biologically adaptive (Williams & Patterson, 1996). What differentiates aesthetic experiences from attachment is that the former is an immediate (sensory) response whereas attachment implies something that builds up and evolves over time. Another example is to distinguish attachment from evaluative judgments such as attitudes or preferences. Whereas attitudes and preferences imply some level of discretion or choice, place attachment implies a deeper, ineluctable bond with a place.

An important methodological conundrum involves whether it makes sense to measure attachment by identifying and aggregating levels of attachment to separable aspects of a place (e.g., physical versus social) as some have suggested (e.g., Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Taken too far, measuring attachment to separable components of place works against the holism embodied in the idea of place. For one, it reverts back to multi-attribute thinking, classic consumer satisfaction research, and environmental perception research in which the focus is on determining how much people perceive and value various aspects of a target object. Again, Russell and Ward (1982) suggested that with respect to place, social and symbolic meanings and attachments refer to place in its entirety rather than as a succession of parts. For another, in some cases the specific categories of place features to which one might become attached seem arbitrary (Williams & Patterson, 2007). In other words, attempts to break down attachment into so many place features begins to resemble strands of environment-behavior research that defined environments in terms of their particular assemblage of generalizable attributes rather than as one-of-a-kind places experienced as a whole.

Finally, a key point of methodological discussion has been the relationship between place attachment and other place concepts such as place meanings and sense of place (Patterson & Williams, 2005). For example, some quantitative approaches to measuring sense of place appear to operationalize and measure

something similar to place attachment as an affective bond (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Shamaï & Ilatov, 2005). These efforts either explicitly identify attachment dimensions (e.g., place dependence and place identity) as core elements of sense of place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001) or reduce sense of place to a singular unidimensional scale designed to measure levels of attachment (Shamaï & Ilatov, 2005). Referring to these approaches as measures of sense of place does not sit well with phenomenological geographers (e.g., Relph, 2008) who regard such quantification as antithetical to their use of the term (Peet, 1998). Similarly some have directed methodological criticism at quantitative measurement of place attachment as an overly narrow approach to issues and topics more suited to the notion of sense of place or place meanings (Stokowski, 2008). In sum, perhaps the central issue plaguing the measurement of place attachment as an emotional bond is that it is frequently confounded with efforts to characterize other or all "meanings" people assign to places.

Place as Center of Meaning

Just as interest in quantifying place bonds emerged in the 1990s, there was growing interest in ways to characterize experience, meaning, and relationships to places in more qualitative (kind rather than degree) terms. Prior to this time, the approach to place meaning in environmental psychology was mostly framed as a question of perceptual, cognitive, and affective "responses" to the environment (Russell & Ward, 1982). In the 1990s the investigation of meaning was increasingly influenced by critiques of information processing models of cognition, which, according to Bruner (1990), had drawn psychology away from its central objective of understanding the mind as a creator of meanings. Rather than searching for causal explanation and prediction, Bruner advocated an interpretive approach to cognition concerned with both symbolic "meaning-making" processes that humans use in constructing and interpreting their world and the processes psychology uses to interpret these acts of interpretation. He characterized "acts of meaning" as a culturally embedded understanding of meaning: "By virtue of participating in culture, meaning is rendered *public* and *shared*" (pp. 12–13). This participation depends upon "shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (Bruner, 1990, p.13).

Meaning is a notoriously difficult notion, and to add to its complexity the meaning of any one place need not generalize to other places or across individuals. This property of uniqueness rather than generalizability reflects the transactional world view as developed by Altman and Roggoff (1987) discussed earlier. While transactionalism is not necessarily associated with a specific research method (e.g., quantitative versus qualitative), it does bring with it assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon being studied that should guide the empirical methods employed in a given study.

As noted earlier my initial investigation into relationships to place took a qualitative direction using personal construct theory (Williams & Schreyer, 1981). Thus after briefly attempting to quantify place meanings (in the same study on measuring place attachment reported in Williams et al., 1992), my colleagues and I concluded

that an interpretive (hermeneutic), transactional approach to describing place meanings would be more epistemologically suited to our goals. In Patterson et al. (1994) we identified four epistemological principles to guide the place meanings research. First, understanding the realm of meaning guiding human action is more akin to interpreting texts than to gaining knowledge of objects in nature. Second, given that human experience is mutually defined by the transactional relationships among places and individuals with unique identities and situational influences, meaning is more appropriately viewed as an emergent narrative than a predictable outcome. Third, a fundamental way people construct and express meaning in their lives is through narrative discourse and story-telling. Fourth, narratives provide the basis for direct interpretation of complex patterns of social interaction rather than drawing inferences based on decontextualized bits and pieces. Building on this interpretive paradigm, I began to explore place meaning in a series of studies to show how people use their experience of places to actively construct various aspects of their identities and maintain a coherent but evolving narrative of self (e.g., Williams & Kaitenborn, 1999; Van Patten & Williams, 2008).

Drawing heavily from environmental cognition research, early work on place meaning also lacked attention to how social and cultural processes influence experience, meaning, and relationship to places. To address this Gustafson (2001) used qualitative interviews to map place meanings within a three-pole model of *self-others-environment*. In his analysis, various place meanings were concerned with the relationships between the self and other people, other people and the environment, self and the environment, or all three—self-others-environment. Similarly, Manzo (2005) combined grounded theory with a phenomenological perspective to examine the lived experience of and relationships to place and showed how these relationships can provide an important sense of belonging and social connectedness or conversely a sense of threat and exclusion.

One of the most recent methodological turns in examining place meaning involves discursive social psychology, which emphasizes how meanings and identities are rhetorically or discursively accomplished. For example, Dixon and Durrheim (2000) draw on discursive social psychology to critique what they see as an overly cognitive approach to place identity (e.g., Proshansky et al., 1983). Discursive social psychology reinterprets the traditional idea of information processing approaches and mental entities such as beliefs and attitudes. Rather than seeing attitudes as predictive of behavior, subjects are seen as deploying a discursive position from among a repertoire of interpretive frames, scripts, or tropes to account for their actions. Thus, discursive accounts "are not so much *performed* (e.g., as with attitudes and other cognitive entities) but *performed*" in conversation and verbal descriptions (Van Patten & Williams, 2008, p. 452).

Much of the research on place meanings employs qualitative analysis of open-ended interviews in which respondents are asked to describe and discuss their relationships to some target place. At the same time there is a sizable body of research employing quantitative analysis of survey data to identify place meanings (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Smith et al., 2011; Stedman, 2003, 2008). According to Stedman, for example, the "key to translating sense of place—and specifically meanings ... is the idea that the physical setting and its attributes take on the role

of an attitude object or locus of cognitions and evaluations. Symbolic meanings about place can be translated into cognitions or beliefs: descriptive statements about 'what kind of place this is' (Stedman, 2008, p. 66).

The choice of qualitative versus quantitative methods to address place as a center of meaning has generated some pointed methodological debate (Patterson & Williams, 2005). On the one hand, Stedman (2003, 2008) has been among the most strident in arguing that the lack of quantitative methods has impeded progress in place attachment research and the measurement of place meanings. On the other hand, quantitative approaches have been criticized for attempting to reduce place meanings into a few generalizable "belief" statements or predefined categories (Stokowski, 2008; Williams & Patterson, 2007). One aspect of the debate is whether quantitative measures of place meanings draw us back to early environmental perception research and treat places like stimulus objects that can be decomposed into attributes about which people might hold various perceptions, beliefs, or preferences. Though individual properties of a place surely hold meaning, the question is whether you can assess the meaning of a *place* as a holistic entity by assessing the individual perceptions of its properties. Another aspect is whether correlating the physical properties of places with belief statements establishes how a place's material qualities shape its meaning in some causal sense (Williams & Patterson, 2007). Looking at places of significant historical meaning such as Gettysburg National Battlefield for example, its meaning is not derived from the physical features of the place but from Americans' collective memories of the events that transpired there. A key issue, then, is whether meaning is assigned to a place or derived from it.

A related methodological question has to do with the individualized, mentalistic nature of place meanings typically assessed in quantitative research. In quantitative studies meaning is usually operationalized as individual perceptions or beliefs (e.g., Stedman, 2008) rather than as socially or discursively produced representations of specific places (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Stokowski, 2008; Van Patten & Williams, 2008). One can certainly ask respondents to rate a place in terms of their perceptions of its material and symbolic properties. But this is not the same as investigating what the place represents symbolically to an individual, community, or culture. From an interpretive or qualitative perspective, meaning is not so much a property of the person or the object, but a transaction between the two mediated through culture, social interaction, and individual past experience. In the qualitative approach, meaning is usually constructed and represented in narrative or storied accounts of peoples' relationship to a place (Williams & Patterson, 2007).

Conclusion

Methodological approaches to place attachment research are often described as split between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Building on the formative ideas behind the development of place research in environmental psychology, this chapter highlighted two central methodological themes. One involves the importance of recognizing places as holistic entities. Specifically the cognitive-attitude approach embedded in some research implicitly relies on multi-attribute

explanations of environmental perceptions popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Williams & Patterson, 2007). To that point "Beyond the Commodity Metaphor" was conceived precisely to challenge this kind of instrumentalism, which was and remains pervasive in environmental management. It was inspired by consumer research that showed how relationships to consumer products go well beyond attitudes and satisfactions as people come to cherish some objects as prized possessions and symbols or markers of identity (Belk, 1992). The argument was in part that relationships to cherished places, like relationships to loved ones and cherished possessions, could not be reduced to evaluative judgments of individual features of a place. Such judgments lacked the holistic, emotive, and contextual qualities of the place idea, which was a key part of its original appeal.

The second theme is that methodological clarity has been encumbered by the tendency to treat research on people-place relationships as a relatively undifferentiated topic when, in fact, it involves a wide range of research programs aimed at fundamentally different questions requiring different methods (Patterson & Williams, 2005). Suggesting that places are holistic entities does not mean that relationships to place should be treated as a unified topic. Rather, the central point has been to argue that more care is needed in distinguishing place concepts. To illustrate this theme, this chapter examined methodological issues associated with two facets of place often discussed under the general rubric of place attachment research. Research has thus far established that the intensity of place attachment can be readily assessed as an individually focused emotional bond between a person and a specifically targeted place at most any level of scale. While still working to improve such measures, we should also continue to examine the experiential, social, and cultural processes that give rise to varying levels of attachment to places within and between individuals and groups. In contrast, investigations into place meanings are of a different sort and, as I have suggested here, are more amenable to qualitative approaches that examine narrative, text, and discourse.

In the introduction to *Place Attachment* Altman and Low (1992) argued that place attachment is a "complex phenomenon that incorporates several aspects of people-place bonding." Indeed they thought place attachment was "not composed of separate or independent parts, components, dimensions, or factors" and described this view "as compatible with transactional perspectives, contextual orientations, phenomenological approaches, and other holistic philosophical views" (p. 4). With 20 years of hindsight this statement appears to apply at least as much, if not more, to the domain of people-place relationships as a whole as to place attachment operationalized as an affective bond. It is place itself that is a transactional, contextual, holistic, phenomenon. Within that holistic context it nevertheless makes sense to measure individual differences in the strength of place bonds as but one aspect of relationships to place. At the same time, and at a broader level, the best collective strategy for studying relationships to place remains a critical pluralist one that recognizes that no one research program by itself can successfully engage the various facets of place (e.g., as a locus of attachment and a center of meaning) and bring them together into one view of reality (Patterson & Williams, 2005). Critical pluralism does not mean that one should refrain from critical reflection on methods, particularly with respect to how well methods are aligned with the stated

objectives of the research. The broader task is still to pursue reflective dialogue on methods (and concepts) to inform and cross-fertilize the different perspectives in place attachment research.

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