PLACE AS A SOURCE OF ATTACHMENT AND IDENTITY ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

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ABSTRACT: The concept of place attachment and the bonding of people to places relates to the way individual and communal aspects of identity are shaped by the sociophysical environment. This paper refers to child and adult populations; indigenous peoples, migrants, and refugees; former residents of institutional programs and the homeless. It is argued that for all these populations security and identity are influenced by place attachment, which is a form of attachment that warrants our close attention.

Introduction

Scholars with an interest in people and their physical settings (Proshansky, Ittleson and Rivlin, 1976) have drawn on materials from many social science sources including Bowlby's attachment theory (1969, 1973, 1980) and have focused attention on the influence of place on behavior and the sense of self. Nevertheless, Proshansky, writing with colleagues in 1979, made the following observation:

> "It still seems inconceivable that psychologists, particularly personality and developmental psychologists ... continue to stress socialization of the child in all of the dimensions of this problem and yet do so without significant concern if any at all, for the influence of the physical setting on this process"
> (Proshansky, Nelson-Shulman and Kaminoff, 1979, p. 3)

Since then "the concept of place attachment the bonding of people to places" (Altman and Low, 1993), which incorporates themes such as place identity, insideness, rootedness, embededness. and community sentiment, has been used in many studies. It has also been used in an examination of various institutional settings including hospitals, schools, and day care centers as well as the urban built environment (Rivlin, 1985).

Recently, Chawla (1992) has attempted a synthesis of psychological theories of attachment in childhood and the evidence from studies of place attachment. This is done in the context of the view promoted by many developmental theorists that a child's feelings for place develop as an extension of the relationship with the primary caregiver and is a secondary effect which does not have an independent existence. Chawla's (1992) model implies that place attachment is independent of person attachment. She identifies sources of place identity in children and

adolescence along four widening dimensions: *inward pulls, outward attractions, social affiliations* and *self-identity*.

Her schema shows how as the move from infant and preschooler (0-5 years) through middle childhood (6-11 years) and then to adolescence (12-17 years) and beyond occurs, different place features dominate. However, the balance between the different dimensions (inward pull, outward attractions, social affiliations, and self-identity) is maintained. Thus, this schema posits "healthy place attachments to balance the inward holds of an intimate familiar center with the outward attraction of an expanding world" (Chawla, 1992, p. 66).

This work is complemented by that on disruptions in place attachment which postulates that "place attachments develop slowly but can be disrupted quickly and can create a long-term phase of dealing with the loss and repairing or recreating attachments to places" (Brown and Perkins, 1992, p. 284). In this context voluntary or involuntary relocations, such as those which flow from events such as migration or natural disasters, are examined against such features as the degree of stability and the extent of change and the way these events affect self-identity.
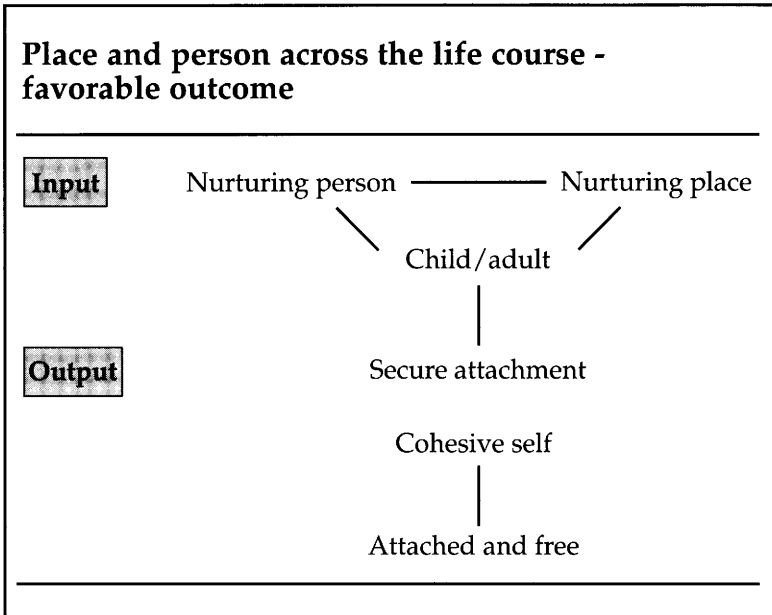
Place and person across the life course

Recollections by adults about early experiences provide the basis for attachment models although evidence shows that such memories may be unreliable. However, theorists from the psychoanalytic schools (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, Kohut, 1971, 1977) have used the adult recollections of childhood experience as the basis for their models about the importance of the relationship of the infant with the primary caregiver. Given this it seems equally valid to use these memories for the purpose of constructing a model of place attachment. Curiously however, models of place attachment, unlike models of attachment or self-identity which have found favor in health and human services (Baker and Baker, 1987, Elson, 1986, McMillen, 1992) are barely considered.

In attempting to integrate these frameworks it is possible to devise a model of development across the life course that takes into account all of these contributions. The model which is systemic in conception positions attachment to person and place as complimentary interacting inputs. This acknowledges that a nurturing place, that is one which offers comfort and security, enhances the capacity of the primary caregiver to be nurturing. It also acknowledges how comfort and security emanate from physical surroundings as well as persons. This is something which every caregiver acknowledges when they seek to respond to a child or adult's basic needs for nutrition, nurturance, and physical comfort.
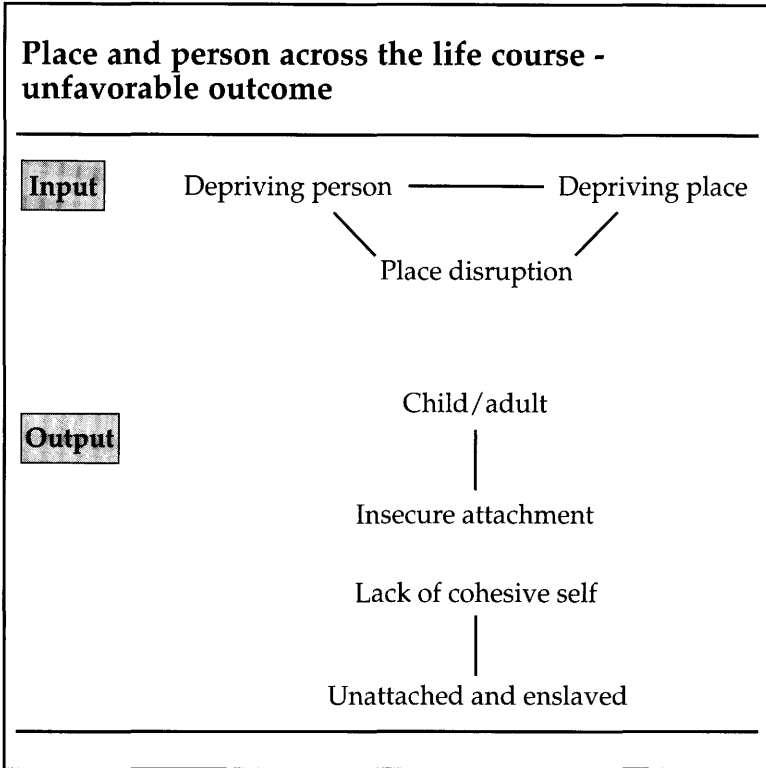
When in balance, these complimentary inputs lead to secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and ultimately to an equally complimentary cohesive self (Kohut, 1971, 1977) with the output being an older child or adult who is both attached and free (Maier, 1982). Figure 1. illustrates the nature of this process.

Figure 1.

Place and person across the life course -
favorable outcome

| Input | Nurturing person ——————— Nurturing place |

                                    Child/adult

| Output | Secure attachment |

                                    Cohesive self

                                    Attached and free

Conversly, the next figure, figure 2, posits the reverse position. This example acknowledges that a depriving place, that is one which offers discomfort and insecurity, diminishes the capacity of the primary caregiver to be nurturing. It also acknowledges how discomfort and insecurity emanate from physical surroundings and place disruptions (Brown and Perkins, 1992) as well as persons. This illustrates negative complementarity in terms of inputs which lead to insecure, anxious, or avoidant attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and ultimately to the equally complimentary lack of a cohesive self (Kohut, 1971, 1977). The output of this process is an older child or adult who, in the extreme, is unattached and enslaved.

Figure 2.

Place and person across the life course -
unfavorable outcome

Input   Depriving person ———————— Depriving place

                        \   /
                          Place disruption

                            Child/adult
Output
                                |

                        Insecure attachment

                        Lack of cohesive self

                                |

                    Unattached and enslaved

If this model has any legitimacy it raises interesting questions about possible compensation between place attachment as a source of security and identity and person attachment as the source of the same factors. Can a nurturing caregiver compensate for a depriving environment and place disruptions? Or can a nurturing place compensate for a depriving caregiver? Traditionally the response of health and human service practitioners has been to argue for compensation in only one direction. That is to say that a nurturing caregiver can overcome the impact of a depriving place and any number of dislocations, and this can result in healthy attached and free older children and adults. An exploration of the seeming importance of place attachment and place disruptions for various groups raises questions about this view.

Examples from the field

What is clear is that for a number of adult populations, namely indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees, former residents of institutional programs, and the homeless, the importance of place attachment warrants serious consideration. Given that these populations include children, place attachment as a factor in development also deserves some attention.

Indigenous people

If we first of all consider the position of indigenous peoples, it becomes obvious that place attachment provides these populations with a profound sense of security and personal identity. This is in evidence in the northern hemisphere in relation to American-Indians whose rootedness to tribal lands is well established. Another example is a similar oneness between place and personal identity found in relation to the Inuit peoples of Canada. Whilst in the southern hemisphere the history, spiritual life, and identity of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia is defined in terms of their sense of relationship and belonging to particular land. Indeed, at least for some members of the Aboriginal community, disruption of place and the severing of this connection to the land by white settlement is seen to be the root cause of endemic social problems such as substance abuse, family violence, and criminal behavior amongst some sections of this community (Ruth, 1990; O'Conner, 1993). Recent land fights legislation acknowledges Aboriginal tide to specific areas of Australia and gives legal standing to this view. It underlines the importance of place attachment as a primary component of personal identity and a sense of self.

Migrants and refugees

The next population group that is worthy of consideration is migrants and refugees. Here we are talking about individuals and families who voluntarily choose to migrate from their country of origin, and refugees who flee unwillingly and relocate in order to escape life-threatening conditions. Once little regard was given to the origin of such peoples, and rapid assimilation into the culture of the receiving country was seen as the priority. With the advent of multi-culturism we now celebrate diversity. This policy reflects the fact that all the receiving countries continue to find that immigrants and refugees want to retain aspects of their own language, culture, and national identity. So today we have for example, Italian-Americans, Greek-Australians, British-West Indians, French-Iranians and Korean-Americans. Each group reflects peaks of migration from different countries and continents associated with particular events and moments in time. Yet, irrespective of the circumstances surrounding the act of migration, all retain aspects of their original identity that is tied to place attachment and their land of origin.

Former institutional residents

We also have the well-known phenomena of former residents of institutional programs such as children's homes, state mental hospitals, or similar settings revisiting these sites. This occurs sometimes years after the person left the institutional program and in spite of the fact that the program may in retrospect be viewed as having been abusive of residents. Young adults bring girl- or boyfriends, wives or husbands to visit children's homes in which they grew up. Young children are brought by parents to see the place in which one of the parents lived as a child. Elderly people revisit a program and recall memories of the place as it was "in my day" (Parkerville Annual Report, 1991). Former state institutions for the mentally ill are revisited by adults now recovered from acute illness, and those with chronic conditions now housed in alternative settings appear and wander in a seemingly aimless manner around the institution (Kramer and Rubinson, 1978). Even those convicted of criminal offenses are known to return to the prison in which they served their sentence. A final example is that of former residents of children's homes now in prison for serious crimes, who maintain correspondence with staff of the home in which they formerly lived. In fact the phenomena has an interesting parallel with adoptees, who as they reach adulthood often search for their natural parents (Triseliotis, 1973). The adoptees search for person, but many former institutional residents return to place.

Such journeys are not to see particular people. The staff these adults knew are long gone. Some may be remembered by anecdote during the return visit, but the visit is essentially to a place of importance, not people. Perhaps it is a return to a place where they felt a measure of security and to which they are attached. The place is a part of them.

The elderly

Materials relating to adult recollections of their childhood feelings about places have also been analyzed by Chawla (1992, p. 74). She identifies four forms of place attachment which she classifies as *affection, transcendence, ambivalence,* and *ideation*. The most common category of affection relates to places associated with family love and security. Here, place is defined by family ties and cultural roots embedded within a sense that "this is my place in the world" when the place was comfortably embraced (Chawla, 1992, p. 74). In transcendence situations, "a place was remembered as an unforgettable living presence in itself" (Chawla, 1992, p. 74). In this analysis ambivalence arises when a place associated with childhood memories was stigmatized by society. Having been in a place stigmatized as one for the poor or undeserving, the individual carries mixed feelings of vulnerability and entrapment. Finally, ideation sometimes emerges as a reaction to a sense of entrapment in the same type of inadequate circumstances (Chawla, 1992, p. 75).

These four forms of place attachment are certainly recognizable in the recollections or reminiscences of adults, especially the elderly. Studies of the processes linking person to place (Rubinstein, 1989) emphasize the importance of home and place in later life. They illustrate how place as well as events and people are endowed with meaning and reinforce personal identity and a sense of self. Furthermore, the evidence from studies of placement disruption or relocation studies (Coffman, 1981) indicates that untimely changes of place may impact morbidity and mortality rates amongst the aged, although this evidence is equivocal. In fact, for the elderly the significance of place seems to grow rather than decline. It is as if place attachment has a permanence across time that in some senses is greater than other relationships.

The homeless
If we accept that children regardless of age find security and personal identity through attachment to primary caregivers and also to place, then homelessness disrupts these processes. This personal identity and sense of self of the primary caregivers is also challenged by homelessness, and the capacity to act as a nurturing figure to a child is inevitably diminished. Furthermore, attachment to place may be difficult to achieve in the sometimes squalid and depriving physical surroundings of a shelter for the homeless. The ambivalence about a place that is stigmatized as discussed earlier (Chawla, 1992) is easy to imagine.

Rivlin (1990) also suggests that homelessness not only disrupts place and person attachment but also severs connections to community, to continuous schooling, and to familiar neighbors and neighborhoods. In fact the disruption in terms of the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1978) threatens the functioning of the micro, meso, and exosystems, and the stability of these systems are central to the health of growing children and adult life.

Conclusion
This paper has used the example of indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees, former residents of institutional programs, and the elderly for illustrative purposes to raise issues about the importance of place attachment. However, these examples are neither exhaustive nor definitive, and no doubt the reader can generate other examples of population groups for whom place attachment is important. Moreover, it can be argued that place attachment is vital for everyone and not just special populations.

Attachment and self-psychology theorists (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Kohut 1971, 1977) show that a child acquires a sense of security and an internal representation of self and others through nurturing or affirming person-person transactions with a primary caregiver. Then what role does place-person transactions play in this process? Transactions between a primary caregiver and child do not occur in a vacuum. They are influenced

by the surroundings or the place in which they occur. If the child inter-
nalizes one type of experience with the primary caregiver, why not the
other, namely, the experience of place. Through this process a child would
be identified as developing a complimentary sense of security and identi-
ty based in place attachment.

We now return to the intriguing question raised earlier. Is compensa-
tion between person attachment and place attachment possible in the
developmental process by which personal identity and cohesive self
emerge? Is it possible that, when person attachments are fragile, a strong
place attachment can balance out the deficit and act as an alternative or
substitute source of inner security even if only for a brief period? Alas, we
do not know. But this might explain why adults who as children were
placed in a Children's Home frequently revisit these locations. We could
find out, and I would like to know...

Author's note: My name is Frank Ainsworth. My sister Joan Greenhalgh
(nee Ainsworth) lives in Ainsworth, a community in Lancashire in the
North of England. I grew up near there. Whilst I'm now an Australian
citizen and live in Perth, Western Australia, no matter what, I will always
be Lancastrian and English. That place is a part of me. In fact it's "my
place." Where's yours?

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