

Sense of place and place identity

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Abstract:

The paper describes the relationship between identity and the physical environment: social identity theory, place- identity theory and identity process theory. The place identity is focused on the relationship between people and the environmental psychology. Then, the paper tends to explain that social identity theory and identity process theory can also be used explaining the relationship between place and identity. Questions to visualize about: How well do identity process theory and social identity theory describe the influences place has on identity? What is the meaning of place in environmental psychology? Does it have any effect on identity and politics of identity? It also argues that place is not a category of identity. Places have symbols of many different social categories and concepts, places speak and preserve identity on various dimensions and levels.

Key words: Place, Identity, Society, Psychology, Politics.

Introduction

What is the meaning of place in environmental psychology and does it have any particular impact on a person's identity? If yes, what kind of effect and by which mechanisms? Lots of elements such as; cultural, genetic, social, as well as the built-environment mix together in order to shape identity. When the relationship between one person and a place grows, that's how people start to identify themselves, in two different scales; larger and smaller. Larger scale covers nation and city whilst smaller scale includes neighbourhood, room, school and workplace. For example, when two people meet the very first questions to ask are: "what is your name" and "where are you from", or if they live in a "city" or "country side". All this information refers to physical places. People personalize their homes, gardens, neighbourhood and the whole city itself reflects as it is due to the fact that people manage and control things the way they seek and prefer. Yet, the converse has its own importance, because places are also affected by people's life pace, method and dynamics. For example, people ornament and decorate their homes, workplaces and gardens the way they prefer, this communicate and reflect who they are.

Place and identity

The etymology of the word "place" comes from Greek plateia (hodos) "broad (way)", from Old French place "place, spot" and directly from Medieval Latin placea "place", from Latin platea "courtyard (open space), avenue". The etymology of "identity" comes from Latin word idem and then it changed into identitas "same", and today it is known as identity "quality of being identical", but in this case the words "place" and "identity" sound more philosophic and poetic than typical research terms. This might be a reason why some environment-behaviour researchers have tried to create other terms defining place in their empirical research, especially when employing quantitative research methods. "Behaviour settings", has been used by Barker, he described as bounded standing patterns of human and nonhuman activity. The theory has been criticized and established by Wicker 1979. Wicker explains social settings as social design evolved over time. Another architectural psychologist Canter during 1977- 1979, was inspired by both theories, and developed his "psychology of space", claiming that place is seen as product of physical attributes, human conceptions and activities. Stokols known as a psychologist, has developed another theory called "transactional view of settings". According to his theory the relationship between a place and a person is interdependent. The word "transactional" focuses solely on either the person or the environment.

The phrase place has been used since 1970s in geography as a "location", then it elaborated into "a place – to dwell" – the process of making a place a home, later as a theory, called "genius loci" the spirit of place- 'gathering', 'thing', 'dwelling', 'being-in-the-world' and 'truth' as inspiration source to establish his unique perception of architecture. (Heidegger, 1962).

The term sense of place is used in various ways, to some it is a feeling of perception held by people (not by the place itself), it is a symbol that makes a place exclusive, it is a characteristic that some geographic places have and some do not. Sense of place is even the feeling the way people experience, express, imagine and know the place in which they live. The word place is often thought as a location of a town, city, neighbourhood, house on the Earth's surface. Place can define the distinctive features, both tangible and intangible. This does not mean that it only contains the elements of a location, it also includes the associations and feelings that we have, when we hear and see a particular space. Terms such as sense of place or attached to a place allude to the complex relationship between humans and their environment. This kind of a relationship includes both the impact of the natural environment on humans as well as the development that human activities have placed on the surrounding environment. It is often said that places tell who you are because a place grows on you and a way of claiming people. A place is not only about getting used to it but it is also about creating and developing a strong relationship with that place and that place bit by bit becomes part of who we are and shapes our identity.

For example, when people travel from one country to another, or from their homeland to another country. Often people become aware of their own sense of place and identity and begin to realize that atmosphere is different and do not feel "at home". There are several different elements such as; landscape, weather, the type of houses, culture even things as sounds and smells are not those that we are used to. On the other hand, if somebody decides to move to a new country or place all of these things will gradually become familiar; a new sense of place will be developing and then it becomes part of our identity.

In social identity theory and identity theory, the self is uncontrolled in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications. This process is called self-categorization in social identity theory. By Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell 1987; in identity theory it is called identification according to McCall and Simmons. As a result identity is formed through the process of self-categorization or identification.

One of the most important things that makes people distinguish from other species is the "self awareness" and the power to "act" and "self reflect". Psychological literature usually tends to explain the different results between "self", "identity" and "personality". These three key words can have a further explanation by dividing them into two terms; "self identity" and "personality". The difference in social and philosophical perspectives is same or relative? Personality is our outer world whilst self identity is the inner world, due to the fact that personality can change by time but identity is the core of the family and it is hard to change. As a result, identity is who you are and personality is what you are.

Theories of identity

Place Identity

The phrase "place- identity" has been found and used since the late 1970s. (Proshansky, 1978), describes as a "potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings"(1983, p.60) Place attachment is part of place identity, but place identity is more than attachment. Place identity is substructure of social identity, like gender and social class. It is composed of observation and interpretation regarding the environment. These elements can be divided into two types; one of them consists of memories, values, thoughts, ideas and settings and another type consists of the relationship between different settings: home, neighbourhood and school.

Identity evolves as children start to differentiate themselves from other people around, and in the same way, place - identity develops as children learn to see themselves as distinct from, but related to, the physical environment. Among the first identity are those rooted in the child's memories with toys, clothes and room. The primary importance is the home followed by neighbourhood and the school. Here, social and environmental skills are learned and "lenses" are formed, from which the child later will evaluate and recognize places. Place identity changes occur throughout a person's lifetime (Proshansky and Fabian, 1987). Five central functions of place- identity have been depicted; recognition, meaning, expressive – requirement, mediating change, anxiety and defence function. Place –identity becomes a cognitive "database" against which every physical setting is experienced. (Proshansky, 1983).

Social Identity Theory

(Hogg & Abrams, 1995; Tajfel, 1982) explains "social identity" as the individual's knowledge of belonging to certain social groups, as well as the emotions and values that conveys to him or her.

The term "self concept" is usually used when referring to the answer to "who am I?" Our "self concepts" hold both statements about what makes us similar to other people, and what makes us dissimilar. People create a perception of themselves and others by means of abstract social categories, and these perceptions become part of people's self-concepts. Humans define selves with factors that characterize the groups to which we belong.

Social identity theory is described as a concept that foresees certain intergroup behaviours on the ground of perceived group status differences, the perceived ability to turn from one group to another and the stability and legitimacy of those status differences. This differentiation with occasions where the phrase "social identity theory" is applied to refer to general theorizing about human social selves. Furthermore, and although some researchers have treated it as such, social identity theory was never determined to be a general theory of social category. It was alertness of the limited scope of social identity theory that led John Turner and his colleagues to establish a cousin theory in the way of self-categorization theory, which built on the awareness of social identity theory to create a more general account of self and group activities. The term social identity approach or social identity perspective, is suggested for describing the joint contributions of both social identity theory and self-categorization theory. (Tayfel and Turner, 70s).

Identity Process Theory

Identity is a dynamic product of the interaction between on the one side the capacities for memory, consciousness and organized construal which are characteristic of the biological organism and on the other the physical and societal structures and influence processes which constitute the social context (Breakwell, 1986).

Identity process theory focuses on three basic processes; thought, action and affect. Thought is the arrangement of the ideas which result from thinking, action the process of doing something, affect to make a difference to something and reach an aim. So, all of these terms are correlated to each other. The process includes both personal and social identity and negative and positive values. The organization of the content analysis is not static but hierarchical, the features change according to inputs and demands from the social context. The identity social frame is regulated by an accommodation – assimilation formation, absorption of new elements, and adjustments in the existing identity shape.

(Breakwell 1983) argues that places are significant sources of identity elements. Particular aspects of identity derived from places we belong to arise because places have figures and images that have meaning and are significant to us. Places represent personal and social memories because they are positioned in the socio-historical matrix of intergroup relations. Places do not have a permanent meaning and the contribution to identity is never the same. Breakwell emphasizes that being in different or new places affect identity through accentuation or attenuation, threat and dislocation. Also argues that places are nested. The nesting is defined as a product of social and personal definition, not according to the geographical hierarchy.

Discussion

How can we relate place to identity?

Massey during 1995 claimed that "sense of place" is more than just one person's feelings about a specific place; such feelings are not only individual but also social. All places are explained from certain social positions and social reasons.

Identifying with a place

One process in which identity is attached to a particular place is by a feeling that you belong to that place. It's place in which you feel comfortable, for example at home because the way you define yourself is symbolized by certain qualities of that place. The geographer Relph, has gone so far as to claim that "to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have to know your place".

Intense feelings of belonging to a place focus on domestic places, starting with a room, a house and a garden. Such places offer a feeling of safety and refuge even though, this is by no means always the case. Strong feelings of identifying with a place may also concentrate on other kinds of places, for example, a sense of belonging to a place may occur at the local scale. One example is the brass bands, based in small villages and industrial towns. The events were famous everywhere, villages became very evident because of the local people. They came to support the band and often wearing the band's colours. Unconsciously, they brought together the local community and the music was part of the sense of place of inhabitants of villages and towns.

It is also possible to locate a sense of belonging at the regional scale. The case of Midwest in United Kingdom is a good example, as settlers moved westwards across the continent, they build their houses and farmed the land, so they felt they belonged to that place.

A sense of place is natural

The occupation of territory is fundamental to human existence. To survive even in the most primitive level of social organization and technology requires access to natural resources of the land, sometimes supplemented by the sea but never wholly independent terra firma. Whether perpetually on the move, as hunters and gatherers, or in fixed and permanent settlements, access to particular territory or to the product thereof is a necessary condition of life. And this may require exclusive access if the means of subsistence are to be assured: a place of their own may become their own place. (Smith, 1990, p.1)

A sense of place is part of the politics of identity

Place is the core concept in environmental psychology, place attachment refers to bonds that people develop with places. Along with place attachment, place identity is another important concept that refers to people's bond's with places. These concepts are used interchangeably but senses of place are also very personal. According to Benedict Anderson 1983 in his analysis of nationalism, reminds us that although its critics may dismiss nationalism as brutal and myopic form of identity, nonetheless many people believe in the rights of their nation passionately enough to kill and die for it. Senses of place may be as impassioned and violent as this. In trying to understand how identity is involved in the often intense emotional construction of senses of place.

Place, resistance and the politics of identity

Senses of place often work to provide differences between one group of people and another, these contrasts are complex and can be based on class, gender, race and many other aspects of identity. The process of Othering – of specifying where you belong is through a contrast with other places as well with other people is more difficult to preserve. Techniques of establishing senses of place and identity are emerging which do not invoke Others, rather than handle difference in more respectful kinds of ways. It is possible to think of difference without thinking with regard of an Other and it is possible to think about interrelations between people and places with tolerance and humility.

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