

Identity and Place

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Abstract

This essay gives a short description of three different theories that can be used to explain the relationship between identity and the physical environment: *social identity theory*, *place-identity theory*, and *identity process theory*. The place-identity theory has given a positive contribution to the field of psychology, emphasizing the influence of the physical environment on identity. But there is little research to support the theory, and its details are not seen in relation to other psychological identity theories. Despite mainstream psychology's ignorance of the physical environment, processes described in social identity theory and identity process theory can also be used explaining the relationship between identity and place. It is also argued that if a general identity theory is used and further developed to explain the place-related aspects of identity, it can unite and broaden knowledge within both environmental and mainstream psychology.

Introduction

Does place have any effect on identity? There are many factors that shape human identity, and identity is among other things a product of the physical environment. When people explain who they are, they use self-concepts that contain information about places; what country they live in, what city or town they are from, if they are a “country- or a city-person” and so on. The places people have belonged to shape their environmental preferences, and how they see themselves. People's identity does not only affect what kind of environment they seek, but it also influences the places they belong to. People personalize their homes, trying to make it reflect who they are.

Home and home place are maybe the most important places in people's life, and therefore the most important places to influence identity. “Home” has been the focus in many valuable research projects, but the same home- and identity-related phenomena are often described in different terms. For example are place identity, place identification and place attachment difficult to separate (Speller, 2000). Few environmental researchers use the word “identity”, something that is understandable because “identity” is a word with indistinct borders, used in different ways within different disciplines (Breakwell, 1986). Other words, like lifestyle, values (Ozaki, 2005),

self, personality (Sadalla & Sheets, 1993) or social attributions (Wilson & MacKenzie, 2000) are more often used. These terms might be more precise. But does the term “identity” include factors like these? What identity theories can be used to explain the interaction between place and identity?

This essay will explore theories of identity that can explain the relationship between place and identity. Identity theories are the main focus of the essay, but perspectives on place will shortly be described as an introduction. Three different theories on identity will then be explained, seen in relation to how these theories can enlighten how place influences identity. A short discussion of whether “place-identity” is a relevant concept for the place-aspects of identity follows. The essay focuses mainly on theory, see Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto & Breakwell (2003) or Speller (2000) for more details on related research and a broader discussion of the identity theories.

Place

How the interaction between people and place is understood, have implications not only for the explanation of the environment’s influence on identity, but also for the definition of environmental psychology, for research methods and the development of theories on specific subjects within the field. At the same time, some of the different theoretical perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the use of theory depends on type of research (Bell et al., 2001).

Environmental psychology has been through a development of different perspectives of place. Existing theories have been criticised, leading to further research and development of new theories. The perspectives on place has gone from “physical determinism” where the environment was seen as having direct effects on behaviour (Franck, 1984), to the view of the people-environment relation as dynamic and interactive.

The meaning of the physical environment has been described in different terms. The use of the word “place” is among else inspired by phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Seamon, 1982), highlighting the subjective experience of the phenomenon of dwelling. The word “place” does not sound like a typical research term, the word sounds more philosophic or poetic (Speller, 2000). Researchers have tried to come up with other terms defining place in environmental research. Barker (1987) uses the term “behaviour settings”, explained as bounded standing patterns of human and nonhuman activity. This theory is criticised and further developed by Wicker (1979), emphasizing behaviour settings as social constructs developed over time. Canter (1977, 1997) was among else inspired by the behaviour-settings-theories when he developed his “psychology of place”, where place is seen as product of physical attributes and human

conceptions and activities. A “transactional view of settings” (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981) can be seen as a theory further emphasizing the interdependent relationship between people and environment. It describes people and place as a unit, highlighting the reciprocal influence between people and places. This essay will use the word “place” based on the transactional view of settings, as Speller (2000) defines it; a geographical space which has acquired meaning through a person’s interaction with the space.

Theories on identity and place

Identity

The word “identity” has different definitions according to different theories. In social psychology, the word “self-concepts” is often used when referring to one’s answers to the question “who am I”. Our “self-concepts” both contain statements about what makes us similar to other people, and what makes us dissimilar. “Social identity” is used about the groups we define ourselves by, and “personal identity” about what makes us different from other people in the groups we belong to (in other words; self-identity, individual identity or personality). Our personal identity consists of our unique and personal characteristics. Within psychology there are numerous different theories on how identity is developed and structured. We form our personal identity in interplay with others. From early childhood a self-understanding develops, as a result of mirroring people around us. This process continues as long as we live. We get an understanding of ourselves, seen in relation to what other people are like, and how other people perceive us (Hatch & Shultz, 2002).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity is explained by Tajfel (1972, see Hogg & Abrams, 1995; Tajfel, 1982) as the individual’s knowledge of belonging to certain social groups, and in addition the emotions and values this has to him or her as a group member. Social identity will define groups such as nationality, culture, religion, social status, family etc. Tajfel (1982) defines social identity to be a part of the individual’s self-concept. People structure their perception of themselves and others by means of abstract social categories, and it becomes aspects of their self-concepts. This produces group behavior. In any given situation different combinations of the self-concept will be central to the individual, producing different self-images. Some parts of our identity will then be silent. In some contexts our behavior is more influenced by group membership than other contexts, as research show; especially in intergroup conflicts or discrimination (Turner, 1982).

Social comparison theory assumes that people see themselves and their group in positive rather than negative light. Positive characteristics are more likely than negative characteristics to be perceived as in-group attributes. This happens because we are motivated to gain and preserve a positive self-esteem. People will then join other groups if a positive self-esteem is not preserved. If people cannot leave a group, they will deny the negative characteristics of the group, or reinterpret them to positive self-concepts (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1982).

Within social psychology, theories on identity have been made, tested and modified, but the element of place has largely been neglected. However, social identity theory is easily transferable, and can be further developed to include aspects of place. In relation to maintaining a positive self-esteem, this means that people will move to places that can maintain their positive self-esteem, and move away from places that have negative impact on their self-esteem (Twigger-Ross, et al., 2003). It is also shown that the stronger attachment people have to a place, the less they consider the negative aspects of the place. In a study that examined the experience of polluted beaches compared to place attachment, denial of pollution was interpreted as a strategy used to cope with a threat to identity from an out-group (Bonaiuto, Glynis & Breakwell, 1996).

Place-identity

Within the interdisciplinary field of environmental psychology there has been a focus on the relationship between people and environment from many angles. “Place attachment” is described as the feelings we acquire towards places with great familiarity, places we belong to (Gifford, 2002). When place attachment grows, we start to identify ourselves with the places, both in larger scale (nationality, city, etc.) and in smaller scale (neighborhood, homes or rooms) (Giuliani, 2003). This results in self-concepts based on places.

Some researchers define the aspects of identity connected to place as “place-identity”. The term has been in use since the late 1970s (Proshansky, 1978). Place-identity is described as the individual’s incorporation of place into the larger concept of self (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983). They described place identity as a “pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings” (1983, p. 60). Place attachment is considered a part of place-identity, but place-identity is more than attachment. Place-identity is a substructure of self-identity like gender and social class, and it is comprised of cognitions about the environment. The cognitions can be organized into two types of clusters; one type consisting of memories, thoughts, values and settings, and the second type of cluster is the relationship among different settings (home, school, neighborhood) (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987).

Identity develops as children learn to differentiate themselves from people around them, and in the same way does place-identity develop as a child learns to see her or himself as distinct from the physical environment. Among the first identity determinants are the determinants rooted in the child's experience with toys, clothes and rooms. The home is the environment of primary importance, followed by the neighborhood and the school. Here, the social and environmental skills and relationships are learned and the "lenses" through which the child later will recognize, evaluate and create places are formed. Place-identity changes occur throughout a person's lifetime (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987). Five central functions of place-identity are described; recognition, meaning, expressive-requirement, mediating change, and anxiety and defense function. Place-identity becomes a cognitive "data base" against which every physical setting is experienced (Proshansky et al., 1983).

Since the term "place-identity" was introduced, the theory of place-identity has been the model of identity which has dominated within environmental psychology. Place-identity theory does not provide much detail on structure and process (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003), but refers to "schemata" that Neisser and Piaget describe as cognitions concerning also the environment. The cognitive structures tend to be remote from the awareness of the individual, even more than social and personal cognitive structures because physical settings are "backdrops" against which events occur (Proshansky et al., 1983).

Identity Process Theory

Breakwell (1983, 1986) has formulated an identity process theory that has proven to be useful also for research on identity with respect to the physical environment (Speller, 2000). Identity is seen as a dynamic, social product of the interaction of the capacities for memory, consciousness and organized construal. Identity can be seen both as a structure and a process. The structure of the identity is manifested through thought, action and affect. This model does not have any distinction between personal and social identity, but differentiates between the content dimension and the value dimension. The content dimension contains both what earlier has been described as personal and social identity, and the value-dimension contains the positive or negative value of these categories. The organization of the content-dimension is hierarchical, but not static. The organization of elements changes according to inputs and demands from the social context. The identity-structure is also regulated by an accommodation-assimilation process; absorption of new components, and adjustments in the existing identity structure.

The formation processes of identity are guided by different principles according to culture, and within a culture these principles will vary over time and across situations.

In Western industrialized cultures, Breakwell (1986, Twigger-Ross et al., 2003) sees the current guidance principles as continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Korpela (1989) argues that in much of the research literature on identity and place there are implicit principles which fit with Breakwell's theory. These principles are also in general well documented by psychological research.

Breakwell (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003) argues that places are important sources of identity elements. Aspects of identity derived from places we belong to arise because places have symbols that have meaning and significance to us. Places represent personal memories, and because places are located in the socio-historical matrix of intergroup relations, they also represent social memories (shared histories). Places do not have permanent meaning, their meaning is renegotiated continually and therefore their contribution to identity is never the same. Breakwell (1996, see Twigger-Ross et al., 2003) also argues that being in new and different places effects identity through attenuation / accentuation, threat and dislocation. She also emphasizes that places are nested (from my room to my country). The nesting may be defined as a product of social and personal meanings, not necessarily as a product of geographical hierarchy.

Discussion

The theory of place-identity came as an answer to the mainstream psychology's ignoring of the physical environment as a factor of importance to human identity. The theory has been analyzed, discussed, and criticized since the late 1970s when it was first introduced (for example: Korpela, 1989; Twigger-Ross & Uzzel, 1996; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Speller, 2000; Manzo, 2003; Twigger-Ross et al., 2003). The critique has mainly referred to the weak empirical and theoretical grounding of place-identity.

Weak empirical grounding

The construct of place-identity is less developed than the theories about social identity, from both an empirical and theoretical point of view (Bonaiuto, et al., 1996). There has been a lack of research to validate the theory. Empirical work has not yet been seen in relation to, or modified the theory (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003). This might be due to the difficulties of operationalizing the place-identity term. Research on identity and place has often been using the place-identity theory as a starting point rather than a theoretical framework. Even if the term "place-identity" is still being used, it is not used within the theoretical framework Proshansky et al. (1978, 1983, 1987) described, but rather as a subjective feeling of identification with home and neighborhood (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003). This shows that there has been a need for the term "place-identity"

to describe the dimensions of identity that concerns the physical environment, but not necessarily a need for a theory made only to explain the relationship between place and identity.

Weak theoretical grounding

The theory of place-identity has not been adequately theorized to fit in with the general psychological theories of identity, nor does it describe the guiding principles for place-identity developing. The five functions of place-identity that Proshansky (1978) describes are not seen in relation to other identity categories, or other identity theories. It is not clear if these functions are seen as unique to place-identity theory or not (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003).

In social identity theory, place can be seen as a social category providing identity. In this sense, social identity theory can easily include the aspect of the physical environment. Place-related functions can be mobilized to achieve positive self-esteem and place can also act as a trigger for identities to emerge (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003). Identity principles and coping strategies operating in the case of social identification with a group can be similar to those processes operating in relation to identification with place (Bonaiuto et al., 1996, Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). But there is not yet done research enough to clarify whether identification with places always happens in the same way as identifications with groups.

Place-identity theory sees place as a part of the self-identity, a sub-identity together with categories like gender, social class etc. But Proshansky (1978) also realizes that some sub-identity categories have physical world dimensions helping to define that identity. He sees the different self-identities of the various roles people play as a part of the total place-identity of each individual. Breakwell's identity process theory sees place as a part of *many* different identity categories, because places contain symbols of class, gender, family and other social roles. In other words, Breakwell's identity process theory also indicates that we do not need a special identity theory to explain the influence place has on identity. Place is a component of different sub-identity categories, and can be incorporated in other psychological identity theories (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003).

Identity in environmental research

A danger of avoiding the term "identity" in environmental research is the difficulty of realizing that many researchers are describing the same phenomena in different terms, and thereby failing to see the connection between similar topics. If the relationship between identity and place is further developed and theorized it may be easier to use the word "identity" in environmental research areas touching upon this topic. It will benefit the field to have a common theoretical framework for research on how personality, lifestyle or social attributions are reflected through

place. Identity theories might be used to explain parts of the research on the meaning of home, residential satisfaction, place attachment, territorial behavior, privacy and related topics. To use identity theories common to other psychological disciplines will narrow the gap between environmental and mainstream psychology, and also expand the knowledge on identity in other psychological research areas.

Conclusion

Proshansky et al. (1978, 1983, 1987) have given an important contribution to psychology with their theory on place-identity. They stressed the physical environment as a factor of importance to identity and asked new questions (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). But it is also of relevance trying to see these theories in contexts with other psychological identity theories. Even if place is not emphasized in identity theories within mainstream psychology, place identity can be explained as an element of both personal and social identity. Theories like social identity theory and identity process theory can also enlighten the relationship between place and identity.

The term “place-identity” has become popular and clearly filled a gap in environmental theory and research. The term will obviously still be used to emphasize the physical environments affect on identity, defined more in the direction of place attachment. But as a theoretical framework the place-identity theory is weak. Place is not a category of identity next to gender, social class, or family. Places contain symbols of *many* different social categories and personal meanings, and represent and maintain identity on different levels and dimensions.

Further research

As the aspect of place earlier has been neglected in relation to psychological identity theories, and studies based on the place-identity theory have been few, there is a need for research that explores the details on place and identity. How well do social identity theory and identity process theory explain the influences place has on identity? In which aspects do these theories have to be further developed? Finding the answers to these questions will both broaden general psychological identity theories, and expand knowledge on the meaning of place in environmental psychology.

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