

Developing understandings of place attachment and identity: critical reflections on Environmental Psychology and Human Geography perspectives

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The concept of place is typically defined in a non-dualistic manner as comprising specific physical locations coupled with associated symbolic meanings and emotions. Ways in which place can intertwine with the self or identity have been studied by academics from a variety of social science disciplines including Environmental Psychology and Human Geography, as well as in the arts and humanities. Yet despite this common interest in studying the transactions and interrelationships between people and their physical surroundings, there has been surprisingly limited dialogue and cross-fertilisation of ideas across disciplinary boundaries. In the environmental psychological literature on place attachment and identity, although the foundational work of 1970s human geographers such as Relph and Tuan is commonly acknowledged, geographical texts on place written since 1980 are frequently ignored. The situation in human geography is little different, for example a recent and widely cited literature review on place (Cresswell, 2004) omitted the environmental psychology literature on place attachment and identity entirely. This paper problematises this tendency towards insularity that seems to be a feature of scholarship in both disciplines in their work on place and the self. At a time when the importance of adopting multi and interdisciplinary approaches to address real-world problems is widely accepted, such neglect is out of synch with contemporary currents in academic scholarship. Moreover,

given that several recently published studies of place attachment have expressed dissatisfaction with current theoretical and methodological approaches to the concept, it seems timely to consider how understandings of place and identity can be energized and developed by inter-disciplinary dialogue. As an initial step in this process, this paper critically reviews some prominent features of recent scholarship on place and identity in Environmental Psychology and Human Geography, drawing out underlying epistemologies, diversity in methodological approach, terminology and areas of application. The value of notions of relationality, embodiment and scale, as theorized and developed in Human Geography research, are discussed in detail in terms of their potential contribution to Environmental Psychological research, using the tripartite model of place attachment proposed by Scannell and Gifford (2010) as a foundation. Finally, the challenges as well as opportunities to be gained from crossing disciplinary boundaries in studying place and identity are discussed.

References

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