

Physical locations and personal identity

Sociology



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

There is an inextricable link between physical locations and personal identity: the one affects the other as the environmental psychologist Harold Proshansky states in “ The City and Self-Identity”, “ Place-identity is defined as those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment”. So, does the way locations affect our individual identity determine how we are included or excluded from parts of society, and how is the perception of places influenced by contrasts with other locations resulting in a sense of attachment or disassociation?

The importance of place in the social context is re-examined by Douglas Robertson with reference to three districts in Stirling; during the early 20th century the local council approved plans for 2 council estates and a private estate. It was quite clear that each of these new areas was designed to separately accommodate different strata of society: slum dwellers, lower middle class and middle class; “ they were not averse to using “ symbolic violence”, defined through stigma and sectarianism, as a means to further..... reinforce the local social hierarchy”. We can see the establishment of three quite distinct places in which individuals will feel attached (included in) to one but not the other two locations. Other examples of this kind of place segregation can be seen in some very distinct city districts: the area known as Kristianborg in Copenhagen is a well known centre for alternative/communal living, and there is very much a sense of “ them” and “ us”.

This brings us to us to the concept of “ Othering”: where a social group with multiple connections/similarities (the inhabitants of Kristianborg in our example) differentiate themselves from the rest of society and assume the

role of an “ unmarked identity” (a kind of reference point for comparisons). This idea of attachment/detachment is clearly depicted in Stephanie Taylor’s commentary on Jonathan Raban’s experiences with the “ Street People” in New York: the homeless people living on the streets appear to take on a group identity associated with their home which is the street. The passers-by keep away from these people partly through fear (they look threatening, dirty, possibly drunk, drugged etc.), but also as they do not want to invade their space on the street. Here we look at the Street People as being the “ marked identity”, and the rest of society as the “ others”.

Urban regeneration is at the forefront of government policies, and is the subject of much polemic. There are numerous examples of this in the UK such as Glasgow, Bristol and Liverpool; there are clearly advantages for these cities in terms of improved resources, but this has also depersonalised certain communities. Some of the areas cleared for redevelopment were homes to large numbers of people and the places they were attached to; “ the over-writing of historical and cultural identities will alienate and marginalise embedded social groups” (Zukin, cited in Scheffler). Communities are also being dismantled/displaced in the countryside: there is much discussion for example of the proposed HS2 train link which could lead to compulsory purchases and destruction of local habitats.

More and more city dwellers are eager to escape the stresses of the urban environment and buy up holiday homes in villages, thus making it increasingly difficult for locals to buy properties in their native areas. All this has a major impact on how some are included or excluded from certain parts of the country, and in turn how place identity will impact on individual “

habitus” (referring to Paul Bourdieu’s, the French social scientist, concept of identity formation).

Individual places obtain an identity through human perceptions based on how locations are made up. An interesting example is the ‘Concrete to Coriander’ project in Birmingham in which a derelict area of the city was used as an urban regeneration project. It provided a meeting place for local ethnic minorities to develop friendships and skills: a place of attachment where they felt secure and included in local society. In other words the women involved saw the garden as a friendly, welcoming place.

Place identity is also important at the “home” level: individual homes are places of privacy in which individuals and families live their lives; different societies have developed customs and laws which govern how the “home” is protected and perceived. In most developed countries the “home” is an area of exclusion for all but family and friends; it is also a place which profoundly affects the development of the individual. People generally feel an attachment to their childhood home, and more comfortable with others from similar backgrounds: “place is an integral part of how individuals see and understand themselves, another identity block in the ongoing construction of a sense of self. It is about feeling at home with others who are seen as similar, as having shared understandings, dispositions and ways of being in the world”.

Tom Inglis goes on to state: “It is quite clear that despite globalisation and the world increasingly becoming one place, identity with local place is still very strong...”. It is interesting to see that despite increased mobility of people in terms of where they work and live, there is still a deep sense of

belonging to one's place of birth/childhood. This in turn suggests a degree of detachment from one's new area of residence: many will for ever feel a sense of exclusion in their new environment.

“ Place-identity shows how people are connected to their communities of practice through their valuing of place, and how this attachment impacts on their learning”. It is quite clear that place-identity has a profound affect on the make up of the individual, and in a sense plays a part in “ placing us” in a society which constantly demands the question : are you one of us? Tom Inglis still finds that place of birth has a strong effect on identity, but will this not dilute as globalisation irradicates national identity?