

Creating an embodied sense of belonging in time

Vanessa May
Neighbourhood effects symposium
University of Manchester
25 July 2015

Outline

- Belonging to place
 - Identity (individual and collective)
 - Embodiment
 - Time
- Thoughts on the benefits of qualitative approaches

Belonging

- A 'process of creating a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places and material objects' that entails 'feeling at ease with one's self and one's social, cultural, relational and material contexts' (May, 2013: 3)
- Understood to contribute to health and wellbeing (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Berkman et al., 2000; Krause & Wulff, 2005; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006; Young et al., 2004)
- Social reality is multiple, multilevel but also the result of conscious reflexivity
 - 'processes of complex causation in urban systems ... multiple nonlinear interactions of multiple levels [that are] interdependent across and between levels' (Uprichard & Byrne, 2006: 665)

Who/what is affecting whom/what?

- Neighbourhoods do not just have effects on people, but we as residents have effects on the neighbourhoods we live in 'conscious human agency as something that matters' (Uprichard & Byrne, 2006: 667)
- How people perceive and conceptualise the world informs how they act, which in turns impacts social life
 - Different groups have differing views on local changes (Byrne & Doyle, 2004): will interact with their environment in different ways, each helping to shape the future of the place
- Talking to people – narratives about *emplaced* individual and collective identity

Individual and place identity entwined

- Harry (60s, retired due to ill health)
- Work ethic central to identity; 'work never hurt anyone'
- Self vs others (particularly younger people) in local area:
 - honest, hard-working, content with his lot, not greedy, brought up properly vs
 - people who are lazy, expect to get things without working for them, who do not behave properly
- Talks of area as one that has gone downhill (since retired)
- Yet describes numerous instances of neighbourliness and a good sense of 'community'
- How people make sense of place is coloured by their personal circumstances

Collective identity

- Collective understandings of place and its character, and its people (see e.g. Tilley, 1994; Bennett, 2014a: 5; Bennett, 2014b)
 - Being of and from a place e.g. ‘Bacup born and bred’ (Edwards, 2000)
- Place attachment collectively accomplished (Degnen, forthcoming; Meinhof & Galasiński, 2005: 72)
 - Social interaction, shared stories and reminiscence to create a sense of social cohesion
 - Place can thus act to bind people together
- But people also draw from collective understandings of what constitutes a ‘good place to live’ (Popay et al., 2003)
 - Individual sense of normative concordance/discordance that has health effects
 - Resources (material, social, ontological) required to minimise normative discordance

Embodiment

- ‘Place is experienced as a sensuous, embodied and emotional geography that we come to know through our senses’ (May, 2013: 138)
 - Embodied knowing that is accumulated over time and becomes ‘part of our subjectivity itself’ (Degnen, forthcoming: 10; O’Neill, 2001)
- Much of this is habitual and ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Garfinkel, 1967)
 - The use of various elicitation methods to help research participants notice and articulate that which they do not normally speak about (Mason & Davies, 2009; Pink, 2012)
- Changes in place ‘are partly experienced as changes in the look, feel, smell and sound of the surrounding world, or as a diminished bodily capacity to act and be within the world.’ (May & Muir, 2015: 8.5)

Embodied dis-ease in place

- Experiencing urban decline:

'I used to take the kids to the swimming baths or I took, well, I took [grandson1] a few weeks ago. But we've got a grotty swimming baths. [. . .] I took him [grandson] to [name of baths] but it was disgusting. Oh, it was disgusting! Filthy, dirty, no facilities at all. So erm I didn't enjoy that. So that's gone by the by.'
(Monica, 60s)

- Embodied experiences of ageing also inform how people relate to place:

Bridget: ..., I feel in a', even though I spent all my working life in, working in [city], I feel as if I'm in a foreign place now. ... I think it's, I think cities are young people's places really. I've come to that conclusion, yeah.

Interviewer: Why is that though?

Bridget: Because of, you know the, all the buzz and everything.

Interviewer: And do you not, do you not enjoy the buzz any more?

Bridget: (I don't like it). No. No, no. ...I like peace and quiet. (Bridget, 60s)

Time

- Narratives are accounts of trajectories over time, capturing individual and social change
- Passage of time as an individual experience (May & Muir, 2015)
 - Temporal displacement: belonging from afar (Harry)
 - Overlapping of past, present and future selves in experience of place (Bennett, 2014a)
- Passage of time as a collective experience
 - ‘Generationed’ places: reflecting the values and lifestyles of certain generations over others (Bridget)
 - Change in place as collectively understood (Bennett, 2014b)

Some thoughts on the benefits of qualitative research

- Narratives convey meaning, conscious reflexivity and potential for collective or individual social action (Uprichard and Byrne, 2006: 666)
 - ‘the ways in which the different dimensions of belonging – relational, cultural, temporal and sensory – interact with each other to contribute to a person’s overall sense of (not) belonging, thus influencing that person’s capacity to act in their surroundings.’ (May & Muir, 2015: 8.5)
- Links between the local micro-, meso-, and macrolevels of social interaction
 - Which levels connect with one another, how they connect, how these are experienced in everyday life
- There is a case to be made for qualitative and quantitative methods to be used alongside each other to capture as much of this complexity as possible

References

- Baumeister, R. F. & Leary, M. R. (1995) 'The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation', *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3): 497-529.
- Berkman, L. F., Glass, T., Brissette, I. & Seeman, T. E. (2000) 'From social integration to health: Durkheim in the new Millennium', *Social Science & Medicine*, 51: 843-857.
- Bennett, J. (2014a) 'Researching the intangible: a phenomenological study of the everyday practices of belonging', *Sociological Research Online*, 18(4): 22.
- Bennett, J. (2014b) 'Gifted places: The inalienable nature of belonging in place', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 32(4): 658 – 71.
- Byrne D.S. & Doyle, A. (2004) 'The visual and the verbal: The interaction of images and discussion in exploring cultural change', in Knowles, C. & Sweetman, P. (eds) *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, London: Routledge, pp. 166-177.
- Degnen, C. (forthcoming) 'Socialising place attachment: Place, social memory and embodied affordances', *Ageing & Society*.
- Edwards, J. (2000) *Born and Bred*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fields, D. (2011) 'Emotional refuge? Dynamics of place and belonging among formerly homeless individuals with mental illness', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4(4): 258-267.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Krause, N. & Wulff, K. M. (2005) 'Church-based social ties, a sense of belonging in a congregation, and physical health status', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15(1): 73-93.
- Mason, J. & Davies, K. (2009) 'Coming to our senses? A critical approach to sensory methodology', *Qualitative Research*, 9(5): 587–603.

May, V. (2013) *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

May, V. & Muir, S. (2015) 'Everyday belonging and ageing: Place and generational change', *Sociological Research Online*, 20(1): 8, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/20/1/8.html>

Meinhof, U.H. & Galasiński, D. (2005) *The Language of Belonging*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

O'Neill, M.E.thne (2001) 'Corporeal experience: A haptic way of knowing', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 55(1): 3-12.

Pink, S. (2012) *Situating Everyday Life*, London: Sage.

Popay, J., Thomas, C. et al. (2003) 'A proper place to live: Health inequalities, agency and the normative dimensions of space', *Social Science & Medicine*, 57: 55–69.

Stevens, N. L., & Westerhof, G. J. (2006) 'Marriage, social integration and loneliness in the second half of life: A comparison of the Dutch and German men and women', *Research on Aging*, 28: 713-729.

Tilley, C. (1994) *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*, Oxford: Berg.

Uprichard, E. & Byrne, D. (2006) 'Representing complex places: a narrative approach', *Environment and Planning A*, 38: 665-676.

Young, A. F., Russell, A. & Powers, J. R. (2004) 'The sense of belonging to a neighbourhood: Can it be measured and is it related to health and well being in older women?', *Social Science & Medicine*, 59: 2627–2637.