Social construction of places as meaningful objects: a symbolic interactionist approach

Reza Azarian

To cite this article: Reza Azarian (19 Sep 2023): Social construction of places as meaningful objects: a symbolic interactionist approach, International Review of Sociology, DOI: 10.1080/03906701.2023.2259060

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2259060

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 19 Sep 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Social construction of places as meaningful objects: a symbolic interactionist approach

Reza Azarian
Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT
Places play a crucial role in the formation of both individual and collective identities. This article seeks to specify how a collective identity is constructed and sustained on the basis of the emotional bonds that the members of the group grow to the place. Drawing on the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism, the article argues that in order to function as the foundation of a group identity, a place needs to be perceived as a meaningful object of particular value. Furthermore, the article argues that the meaningfulness of the place occurs through the articulation of a narrative of uniqueness, that, drawing on the bulk of shared place-related life experiences, celebrates the special character of the place in question and shores up its unique meaning and value.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 22 April 2022
Accepted 15 May 2023

KEYWORDS
Place attachment; social categories; Herbert Blumer; collective identity

Introduction

Apparently, social life is always emplaced in that the stream of daily encounters takes place at numerous sites and the current of everyday events flows through myriad locations. Moreover, we often develop special, emotionally charged relations to specific places because these in one way or another are connected to the experiences that are significant to us and, therefore, evoke certain, and occasionally strong, thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, at an existential level, particular places can influence our beliefs and understandings regarding who we are and where we belong – issues that are fundamental to our self-experience, self-awareness and self-categorization.

Since the 1970s, various layers of place-people relationship have received considerable scholarly attention, particularly within disciplines explicitly concerned with the study of human-environment relations, including human geography, environmental psychology and urban planning. As result, a sizeable body of knowledge has eventually grown at the intersection of these disciplines. In this context, the sociological contribution however seems pale in comparison. Place hardly features as one of the substantive concerns in sociological literature, and is rarely indexed in canonical texts of any kind. In fact, despite the important role that places play in people’s lives, sociology has not up to
now paid due attention to place as a crucial social phenomenon, and has not even acknowledged it as a distinct, sociologically important topic in its own right, worthy of conceptual elaboration and empirical inquiry.

Against this background, the present article follows the lead offered by Thomas Gieryn (2000, p. 481) who suggests, ‘Sociologists should perhaps add place to race, class, and gender as a wellspring of identity drawn upon to decide just who we are.’ Representing an attempt in this direction, the article argues that place has important implications for social analysis, and approaches the issue from the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, seeking to disclose and discuss some of these implications. More specifically, the key argument here is that particular places can be socially constructed as meaningful objects of significant emotional value for the people related to them. Furthermore, it argues that relations to such places can yield important cognitive schemes, social categories and identities, and can induce significant emotions, action dispositions and modes of interaction.

**Sociology and place**

The treatment of place in sociological literature can be traced back to the early texts where its social significance is underlined on a few occasions, but only in the passing and/or implicitly. For instance, in *An Introduction to the Study of Society* Albion Small and George Vincent (1894, p. 198) draw attention to what they refer to as local loyalty. Moreover, they point out common birthplace and territorial community as two factors of attraction that, pulling people together, are consequential for the formation of social relationships and groups. In their words:

> Men who have associations connected with a common birthplace are naturally drawn into social relations. … The people who inhabit the same territory have, as a result of such community, a certain coherence. This fact is conspicuously true of smaller groups. Loyalty to one’s town or city is proverbial. The esprit de corps of a young and progressive city is a notable feature of its social life, and holds the entire population in a definite aggregate. (Small & Vincent, 1894, pp. 199–200)

Another example can be found in *Primitive Classifications*, where Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (1963/1903) investigate the correspondence between the social and symbolic classifications, and offer some key insights into how the spatial organization of simple societies – that is, geographic arrangement of villages and dwellings – derives from, and is designed to maintain the kinship structure.

Moreover, some other classical sociologists have explored the implication of urbanization and metropolitan life for people’s social existence and for the nature of their social relations in particular. Whereas Ferdinand Tönnies for instance understood the importance of locality for the preservation of the emotive quality of social ties, Georg Simmel wrote extensively on how in city – the seat of pecuniary economy – human associations increasingly become contractual, calculative, impersonal, superficial, and transitory. In the same fashion, one of the key founders of urban sociology Louis Wirth (1938, pp. 20–21) described the distinctive features of the urban mode of life in terms of ‘the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of the neighborhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity.’
Bourdieu’s Algerian fieldwork (1970, 1973, 1977) stands for additional and more contemporary examples. In a similar fashion as the above-mentioned study of Durkheim and Mauss, Bourdieu’s work shows how the allocation of places – both inside the houses in the Kabyle village and in the public spaces like the square or the field – reflects, and corresponds to, the basic dichotomies (e.g. male/female, dry/wet, high/low, light/dark, up/down, right/left), which structure the Berber worldview and which permeate their culture by providing pertinent schemes of perception and appreciation.

Moreover, both rural and urban sociology are the sub-fields that explicitly have a spatial basis for their demarcation and that are defined in terms of their spatial focus (Gieling et al., 2018; McKnight et al., 2017; Walker & Ryan, 2008; Winterton & Warburton, 2012). Sociologists working within these sub-fields have, over the years, provided a number of studies describing in vivid portraits the patterns of social life and interaction both on the countryside and in urban environments (Anderson, 1990; Bultena, 1969; Gans, 1967, 1982; Leibow, 1967; Munch & Campbell, 1963; Suttles, 1968; Whyte, 1993).

Furthermore, a strand of place-related sociological work, partly inspired by the core ideas of Chicago School, is to be found within the interactionist tradition. For instance, it is usually assumed that, through locational socialization (Lofland, 1998), people normally acquire a stock of pre-determined practical knowledge and understanding of the social significance of the sites of their interactions. Due to this socialization, people learn about the social roles, behavioral patterns, typical situations and expectations pertinent to the particular places, guiding them in determining what kind of activity goes on where and who are to do what in which place, as for instance in the case of schools and teachers, courts and judges, or clinics and doctors.

This type of treatment of the social significance of place comes to expression in the work of Gary Fine (2012, p. 165), for instance, who underscores the impact of locational socialization on the formation of behavioral expectations by holding that whereas ‘churches demand quiet attentiveness, schoolrooms promote ordered participation, and taverns encourage sociable involvement.’ In fact, it is not particularly difficult to find studies that, conducted in this spirit, offer detailed accounts showing how the specific social character of particular places affects the mode of interactions taking place there. Among these are the works that analyze the patterns of face-to-face interaction pertinent to specific types of locations such as restrooms (Cahill et al., 1985), racetracks (Rosecrance, 1986; Scott, 1968), pornographic bookstores (Karp, 1973) as well as other public places like bars, pubs, cafes, restaurants and alike (Anderson, 1976; Britton, 1983; Byrne, 1978; Cavan, 1966; Duneier, 1992; Gottlieb, 1957; Katovich & Reese, 1987; Kingsdale, 1973; LeMasters, 1973, 1975; Marshall, 1986; Nathe, 1976; Reitzes & Diver, 1982; Richards, 1963–1964; Roebuck & Frese, 1976; Roebuck & Spray, 1967; Shapira & Navon, 1991; Smith, 1985; Spradley & Mann, 1975; Thomas, 1978).

The connection between people and places, however, runs deeper, and it is not always possible to capture its depth through ethnographic snapshots. At a more fundamental level, particular places can play a much more significant and enduring role in people’s social lives and influence their beliefs and understandings regarding who they are and where they belong. These deeper dimensions of the place-people relationship have unfortunately been largely omitted by sociologists, and although there are a few exception (Gieryn, 2000; Holmberg, 2017, see below), the overwhelming bulk of the literature focusing on such meanings and bearings of place have been produced by scholars
belonging to various disciplines other than sociology. Aiming to go beyond the treatment of places as given and unproblematic sites of events and interactions, these scholars have called for more attention to various dimensions and layers of the complex place-people relationship, and have tried to explore the meanings and feelings associated with places as well as the social processes by which these meanings and feelings are generated, maintained, conveyed and/or disputed. What follows below is a brief inventory of some of the works done by these scholars.

**Place-related emotions and identities**

The surge in scholarly interest in place has its tangled roots in several loosely related critiques that, surfacing in the early 1970s, targeted the prevailing positivist mode of thought in the disciplines such as geography and psychology which tended to reduce place to 'little more than location and constraint on human action' (Williams, 2014, p. 75). People like Robert Lee (1972, 1973), Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1975, 1977), Edward Relph (1976), Anne Buttimer (1976) and David Canter (1977), for instance, are among the humanistic geographers and environmental psychologists who are credited most for launching this sort of criticism and for underscoring the impact of place as an integral element in human social experience. Pushing the initial developments in place studies towards a more phenomenological direction, they advocated a re-definition of place within an *experiential perspective* (Tuan, 1975) and a re-direction of attention towards people’s *lived experience* of places.

Over the years, this endeavor has led to the production of a whole array of concepts, each capturing some aspect of the people-place relationship. Among these are *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974), *spatial identity* (Fried, 1963), *settlement identity* (Feldman, 1990), *place identity* (Hull et al., 1994; Proshansky et al., 1983), *place dependence* (Stokolos & Shuman, 1981), *sense of place* (Feld & Basso, 1996; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2003; Shamai, 1991), *place character* (Paulsen, 2004), and finally *place attachment* (Altman & Low, 1992; Brown et al., 2003; Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

This affluence of concepts has also been paralleled with a large bulk of empirical studies that have sought to explore various dimensions of people-place relationship. An outstanding topic in this bulk regards the emotional bonds that people usually grow to particular places. Research demonstrates that such attachment results from accumulated biographical experience, and stabilizes memories against the passage of time (Chawla, 1992; Halbwachs, 1980/1950; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Marcus, 1992; Reed et al., 1997; Rowles, 1983; Rubenstein & Parmelee, 1992; Schroeder, 1991). The strength of this emotional bond is determined by personal experiences associated with the place, including the fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant and/or secret events as well as the mundane everyday activities; and the longer people have lived in a place, the more rooted they feel and the more emotionally they are attached to the place in question, as it evokes distinct thoughts, feelings, memories and interpretations (Elder et al., 1996; Herting et al., 1997).

Another strand of research has more specifically illuminated the significance of places for the individual’s sense of existential security. Some findings confirm the importance of places with regard to their function as the points of gravitation in people’s lives (Marcus, 1992) or as their symbolic life lines (Hummon, 1989) and have shown how particular
places can underpin individuals’ ‘sense of security and well-being’ (Gieryn, 2000, p. 481) by becoming the anchors in their lives (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Gerson et al., 1977; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Marcus, 1992; Orum & Chen, 2003; Rivlin, 1982, 1987; Sampson, 1988).

Finally, perhaps the most important finding concerns the interlocking of places and identities. Here, the tone was set by Relph (1976, p. 4) who, calling for a ‘phenomenology of place’ reinforced the newfound recognition of the social meaning of places and their identity-expressive aspects and underscored the importance of people’s links to emotionally charged places for the formation of their identities, asserting,

There is for virtually everyone a deep association with, and consciousness of, the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security. (Relph, 1976, p. 43)

Following this lead, Proshansky et al. (1983) for instance have been influential in promoting a place-bounded conception of self and personality. Launching the notion of place-identity as a sensitizing construct, they define the term as a ‘pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings.’ Furthermore, they argue that, as a distinctive sub-stratum of the self, place-identity might function to support the individual’s identity, affect his or her tastes and preferences, and induce certain actions and/or activities that are oriented towards specific places (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 60).

Concerning individual identity, researchers have shown that to the extent an individual grows an emotional attachment to a specific place and relies on it for his or her existential security, the place in question constitutes an important part of the individual’s perception of his or her self and thereby plays a significant role in the formation and underpinning the individual’s identity, for instance by giving expression to his or her personhood as a unique self (Altman & Chemers, 1985; Morgan, 2010; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010).

Moreover, research suggests that places not only can foster a ‘sense of individual identity of who we are’ (Orum & Chen, 2003, p. 11), they may also be instrumental in the construction and maintenance of the identity of groups. Multiple studies within the interdisciplinary field of community studies have explored the ways in which places and collective identities can be inextricably interlocked. Among other things, the research within this field has demonstrated that, like individuals, social groups – ranging from families and friends to neighborhoods and communities – too can develop a powerful sense of themselves through their connection to places. This means that places can ‘give rise to a sense of community’ among the members of the group and, as these members experience themselves as ‘being part of a larger group’ (Orum & Chen, 2003, pp. 11–12) and that the places in question can constitute significant loci of sentiment and meaning for them (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Gerson et al., 1977; Hillery, 1955; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1999; Molotch et al., 2000; Park, 1936; Rivlin, 1982, 1987; Sampson, 1988).

Others have underlined the importance of place for the delineation of group boundaries. That is, places may serve to ‘define [social] boundaries’ of a group (Gieryn, 2000, p. 481), shoring up its relative position, and communicating its distance from other social
groups. For instance, some studies have revealed that the differentiated symbolic values attached to various neighborhoods in the metropolitan areas are often taken as tokens of social standing and as markers of social categories, underscoring their boundaries and signaling who is in and who is not (Csikzentimihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Hunter, 1987; Pratt, 1982).

In addition to status differentiation and ranking among social groups, places may also function to signal other kinds of communalities and convey other types of distinction. An early example is to be found in Lee’s (1972) study that shows whereas neighboring parks often function as social territories to mark ethnic group identities, national parks typically symbolize middle class values such as commitment to protect unique natural heritages. Or, to take a more recent example, Holmberg (2017, 2018) examines a special case of place-people relationship, notably, the one between the Swedish mansions and the estate owners/managers, demonstrating how the latter – by drawing on the symbolic capital associated with their properties – foster a place-based identity and a way of life which is ‘presented in narratives of the past, present and future’ (Holmberg, 2017, p. 115), and which is put on display, among other things, through appropriate cultural consumption.

Furthermore, there is a strand of work that explores the relationship between people and sport places. In his study of British football, Bale (1993, 2002) for instance demonstrates what particular football stadiums can mean to some people for whom this sport assumes almost a religious significance. Or, to mention yet another study of British football, Charleston (2009) shows how the professional football grounds may grow into places of special meaning and even embody the same emotional attachment as other places called home – a term usually used to denote the site of family.

Finally, it has been observed that the strong emotional connection between place and identity has a flip side as well. As the ongoing war in Ukraine painfully reminds us, forced migration – the coerced movement of a people away from their home or home region – which can result from a variety of external causes including natural disasters, violence, and persecution, is obviously an important factor generating displacement, that is, an involuntary disruption of place attachment. On the other hand, destruction of places due to slum clearance or renovation or simply for the purpose of making way for more profitable buildings is also a familiar story in many urban centers around the world, rendering displacement ‘one of the most common phenomena in modern city life’ (Friedmann, 2010, p. 162). At any rate, loss of place in either case can give rise to resilient nostalgic affections. In fact, to the degree that place attachment is constitutive to the person’s identity, the loss of place is likely to affect negatively the person’s sense of who he or she is. More specifically, although it is possible that displacement can create opportunities to establish new, progressive senses of place that are trans-local in character, it normally triggers strong emotional reactions and can give rise to identity discontinuity (Milligan, 2003). The latter may in turn induce a prolonged grieving process (Abrahamson, 1996; Fried, 1963; Gans, 1982) and a persistent feeling of nostalgia, which rather than being an abnormal undesirable or overly sentimental response to change, is a natural and essential part of the individual’s grieving process developed in order to preserve or regain a ‘sense of identity continuity through re-cognizing and re-defining a shared past’ (Milligan, 2003, p. 381). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the experience of displacement and the subsequent feeling of
nostalgia are determined to a large extent, not only by the strength of the emotional attachment of the individual to the place but also by the specific conditions under which the displacement occurs. In other words, research shows that these conditions are crucial determinants of the depth, force and durability of the subsequent feeling of nostalgia. The more sudden, undesired and disruptive the experience of the displacement, the deeper, the stronger and the more traumatic the ensuing nostalgia (Kibreab, 1999; Parkin, 1999).

**Places and their meanings**

Despite the considerable increase in the scholarly attention, however, the research focusing on the place-people relation is still very much in an early developmental phase in one important respect. That is, whereas this nascent field is at the present characterized by ‘a wealth of empirical results and conceptual innovations’ (Lewicka, 2011, p. 208), there are still a number of important issues in need of further theoretical as well as empirical work and there is still much room left for both conceptual and methodological contributions to be made in a number of specific areas (Giuliani & Feldman, 1993; Morgan, 2010; Stedman, 2002, 2003).

One such underdeveloped area regards the construction of meaning assigned to places. That is, at the most fundamental level, for people to grow emotional attachment to particular place and to regard them as the spatial foundation of their identities, these places need to be charged with special meanings and values to the people. Such places in other words, need to be perceived as meaningful objects of significance, if people are to relate to them in meaningful ways, both emotionally and intellectually. The meaningfulness of place in this regard constitutes indeed the core insight from which the above-mentioned phenomenological movement derives, and has been acknowledged explicitly as a crucial quality in the re-definition attempts undertaken by the pioneers of this movement. For instance, in his attempt to define place from a phenomenological stance, Relph (1976, p. 47) highlights physical setting, social activities and meaning as the ‘three basic’ and closely inter-related elements that jointly make up the ‘the identity’ of a place. Many others have followed this lead, and provided similar definitions (Canter, 1977; Carmona et al., 2010; Gustafson, 2001; Larsen, 2008; Manzo, 2005; Montgomery, 1998; Punter, 1991; Yung et al., 2003). For instance, in line with Relph and others, Gieryn (2000) highlights meaningfulness as a key feature, which along with two other ones – location and physicality or material form – can turn a place into something more than just ‘some spot in the universe, with a gathering of physical stuff there.’ Accordingly, ‘in spite of its relatively enduring and imposing materiality’ a place can be ‘also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined,’ and it can carry in itself a meaning or a value, which rather than being inherent, given and fixed is ‘labile – flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested’ (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465).

However, although meaningfulness admittedly takes a central place in the re-definition of place, the processes through which particular places become meaningful objects remain rather under-researched. In order to contribute in this regard, that is, to advance research by specifying the process through which places can be transformed into objects charged with meaning, this article draws on the core principles of Herbert
Blumer’s brand of symbolic interactionism with its characteristic emphasis on the social creation of meaning.

This particular brand has its point of departure in a distinct methodological position, which in turn has certain implications for social analysis. Dismissing the mode of sociological inquiry known as survey analysis, which usually deploys various statistical constructs, Blumer (1969, pp. 34–35) maintains that ‘what is needed is a return to the empirical social world’ (emphasis added), that is, a mode of analysis that approaches and explores ‘the world of everyday experience [which] consists of what [human beings] experience and do, individually and collectively, as they engage in their respective forms of living.’ Such methodological premise entails necessarily that the researcher takes actor’s point of view and tries to examine this reality ‘from the point of view of the actor’ – that is, the real-world actor who, ceaselessly engaged in interaction, acts intentionally and meaningfully towards the specific situation he or she confronts, rather than responding to it according to some pre-given psychological schemes or abstract cultural prescriptions.

The empirical reality to be explored from the actor’s point of view, however, consists of meaningful objects and meaningful connections among them. That is, as one of the key tenets of Blumer’s brand of symbolic interaction has it, anything in the world of the acting person can become an object to which the person attaches meaning and upon which he or she acts. Drawing on one of the fundamental pillars in Mead’s sociological thought, Blumer in other words builds his own scheme of analysis on the concept of object, using the term with the largest possible connotation and allowing it to refer to anything that can be sensed, thought about or known, be it physical as a chair or imaginary as a ghost, natural as a cloud in the sky or man-made as an automobile, material as the Empire State Building or abstract as the concept of liberty, animate as an elephant or inanimate as a vein of coal, inclusive of a class of people as politicians or restricted to a specific person as President de Gaulle, definite as a multiplication table or vague as a philosophical doctrine. (Blumer, 1966, p. 539)

Moreover, as another basic premise of Blumer’s interactionist outlook suggests, objects by themselves lack any intrinsic meaning telling us what they are but rather consist of whatever meaning people assign to them. That is, objects do not carry with themselves a luggage of pre-socially fixed meanings. Nor are the meanings attached to them as the results of purely individual imagination arising in a social vacuum. Rather than self-existing entities with intrinsic natures, meaningful objects are human constructs in that their nature is dependent on the orientation and action of people towards them and that they acquire their meanings through interactions of the people who in one way or another relate themselves to them. The meanings of the objects, in other words, exceed the individual person and are inevitably social in that they ‘are formed, sustained, weakened and transformed in [people’s] interaction with one another’ (Blumer, 1969, p. 20); and it is precisely this essentially social origin of the meanings of the objects that counts for their indeterminacy and openness to actors’ interpretations and defining activities (Blumer, 1969, p. 5).

It is worth mentioning that this view – that is the potentiality of any anything in the world to be turned into a meaningful object through social interaction – represents an essential element in Blumer’s overall approach to social reality, which stems from his
conception of humans as intrinsically meaning-creating beings. For instance, self is conceptualized in the same fashion and receives same treatment, as he draws heavily on Mead’s notion that, lacking a pre-social core and an intrinsic meaning of its own, self is a social object, emerging out of and acquiring its meaning in interaction and self-interaction. In Blumer’s (1966, pp. 535–536) own words,

the human being is an object to himself. The human being may perceive himself, have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself, and act toward himself. As these types of behavior imply, the human being may become the object of his own action. This gives him the means of interacting with himself – addressing himself, responding to the address, and addressing himself anew. … And by continuing to interact with himself, he may plan and organize his action with regard to what he has designated and evaluated. In short, the possession of a self provides the human being with a mechanism of self-interaction with which to meet the world – a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding his conduct. I wish to stress that Mead saw the self as a process and not as a structure.

The same goes for the conceptualization of joint action, which – denoting all kinds of social interactions – represents the most central concept in Blumer’s entire theoretical framework. Accordingly, rather than enacting prescribed roles and following ‘fixed and established channels’ (Blumer, 1969, p. 72) of interaction, social actors enter the situations ‘thrusted on them by their conditions of life’ (Blumer, 1969, p. 72) only with ‘initial bids for possible lines of action’ (Blumer, 1969, p. 97) without any certainty about how the interaction will unfold and what it will lead to. The career of the interaction, that is, its course and outcome and above all its meaning to the participants are all contingent on how the participants identify, interpret and define each other’s acts and how they adjust their own lines of action accordingly. As the interaction unfolds, ‘given lines of action may be started or stopped, they may be abandoned or postponed, they may be confined to mere planning or to an inner life of reverie, or if initiated, they may be transformed’ (Blumer, 1969, p. 16). Therefore, in Blumer’s view, social interaction is essentially an ‘emergent phenomenon’ (Cuff et al., 1998, p. 135), taking shape only through the ongoing fitting attempts of its participants and assuming its meaning through these participants’ mutual interpretations and defining activities, rendering ‘uncertainty, contingency and transformation [its] part and parcel.’

In sum, thus, the empirical world out there is a universe of meaningful objects with meaningful connections among them rather than an environment of stimuli or self-constituted entities; or as Blumer (1969, p. 20) puts is, ‘people live in worlds of objects and are guided in their orientation and action by the meaning of these objects.’ Yet, these meanings are not inherent to the objects themselves but are worked out in the course of situated interactions and through the defining activities of the people orienting and acting towards them. That is, the world of objects around people is socially produced in that the meanings of the objects are fabricated through the process of social interaction, forged and found only in the actors’ defining activities; and as the outcome of the actors’ ongoing defining activities, such meanings are emergent phenomena that – never fully and perpetually determined – are malleable and changeable.

Approaching the people-place relationship from this general theoretical position, the present article argues that places are no different from other objects in the world in that they too can become objects charged with meaning and can be experienced as such by people who relate to them. Following Blumer, this article dismisses the treatment of
places as unproblematic physical settings for interaction or sheer scenes of role enactment. Instead, it argues that, through interaction, places can be turned into meaningful objects of particular significance. That is, more that something that is ‘only fleetingly observed on the landscape, a locale, or setting for activity and social interaction’ (Giddens, 1979, pp. 206–207; as quoted in Pred, 1984, p. 279), places can become meaningful objects due to human interaction with them. It is through the engagement with people’s consciousness, intentionality and sensibility that places acquire their distinctive meanings, which nevertheless are constantly defined and re-defined through joint social construction. In this sense, places are emergent social phenomena, constantly in the process of being made and re-made, maintaining, asserting and/or changing their meanings through individual and collective defining activities of the people connected to them.

Furthermore, the article proposes the idea that what occurs in such interaction is a process of social construction in which the place in question acquires its meaningfulness through the articulation of a narrative of uniqueness. The articulation of such narrative usually revolves around the characteristics of the place in question and the attributes assigned to its people – a construction, which in particular emphasizes the singularity of the place and celebrates the distinct features of its people associated with it. The resultant narrative has certain features that call for due attention.

First, a place becomes a meaningful object of affection because of the emotional value that it embraces and represents – a value that is induced by, and closely correlated with the positive appraisal that the place has in the eyes of the people related to it (Arnold, 1960). This value obviously has a social source in that it stems from, and reflects people’s sense of social embeddedness and rootedness (Burley, 2007). That is, a give place becomes valuable to the people associated with because it represents a vessel or a carrier of valuable social experiences and because it embodies the whole range of their social activities and the bulk of their common past, accumulated and engraved there (Katovich & Couch, 1992; Katovich & Hintz, 1997).

Second, the narrative that revolves around a place normally weaves together different physical properties of the place as well as the myriad social and cultural features of the life connected to it. In other words, in the articulation of a place-based narrative it can be seen in how ‘the material aspects of a place … work together’ with its ‘symbolic dimensions’ (Paulsen, 2004) and how the ‘basic elements’ (Relph, 1976, p. 47) of a place such as ‘location and physicality’ (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465) and the ‘social activities’ pertinent to it are synthesized to produce a general characterization of the place in question.

Third, the synthesized outcome, put together by myriad uncoordinated actors, is obviously an arbitrary construction in that it is produced by pooling together various and randomly selected characteristics of the place, with the elements from the wide ‘range of [the] subtleties and significands’ (Smaldone et al., 2005, p. 400) of the people’s past and present engagement with the place. However, beneath the apparent arbitrariness, the construction of such narrative follows a clear, though often unspoken, logic. Various elements are brought together in a symbiotic conjunction to produce a single effect, notably to highlight the uniqueness of the place in question and by extension, the distinctiveness of the people associated with it. That is, the individual accounts may demonstrate large variations with regard to topic and focus. Yet, the characterization of the place usually spins around a central theme and aims towards a single point, theme,
namely, the singularity of the place, often followed by an emphasis on the distinct features of the lifestyle of the people related to it.

Fourth, although the spatial focus of this narrative – the particular place that it revolves around – is depicted randomly and in fragmentary, idiosyncratic and uncoordinated ways, the constructed narrative is nonetheless a social product in that its construction exceeds the individual. In other words, it is a story that is created, developed, confirmed and conveyed in repeated interaction among the people associated with it. It is a story that is told repeatedly in these interactions in a variety of forms and on numerous occasions, and its continued existence is contingent upon the ongoing interactive processes among the members of the group who, through their recollections, continue to keep it vivacious.

Implications

When narrated, place can have important implications for social analysis. Its sociological importance stems from the fact that, when turned into a meaningful object, place can give rise to emotions such as place attachment and the resilient nostalgic affections – emotions of considerable strength and durability that not only have a significant bearing on the state of the mind of people and their well-being but also influence the formation of their social ties and networks, shape their inter-groups relations, and, at times, generate powerful action dispositions. For instance, it was observed by Durkheim (1984) that whereas functional differences caused by division of labor and specialization provide an important ground for the formation of social bonds in modern settings, any perceived likeness or similarity can also function as a fundamental rationale of connectivity. Accordingly, the need of belonging to a group constitutes a motivational force, which can generate social linkages fueled mainly by the parties’ mutual perception of affinity and the accompanied sense of fellowship, solidarity and group identification (Azarian, 2010). In this regard, the sense of belonging to the same place and the sharing of largely similar spatial experience can plausibly be seen as a particular kind of similarity upon which durable relationships and networks can be formed. By extension, these place-related emotions and the social ties they generate can be crucial for the accumulation and distribution of social capital among people. As mentioned at the outset, the point was acknowledged by early sociologists (Small & Vincent, 1894) who considered common birthplace and territorial community as factors that are consequential for the formation of social relationships and groups. Moreover, emotions such as place attachment and nostalgia can potential provide actors with energies that, by pushing them towards one another and pulling them apart, fuel many of the relationship that people develop ‘with one another,’ ‘for one another,’ and ‘against one another’ (Simmel, 1971, p. 53).

More important for our discussion here, however, are the categorizing effects of places narrated through the stories of their uniqueness. That is, the socially rooted value of the place not only makes it an emotionally relevant and important object of affection but also it renders the place a meaningful point of reference by virtue of which one can organize one’s social world and make sense of it. That is, the ascribed value to the place makes it possible for the people associated with it to situate, position, and navigate in the world, and to attend, relate and orientate to it meaningfully.
Obviously, people tell many kinds of stories about themselves and others, and they do so in a variety of situations and on multiple occasions. However, the story told about the uniqueness of a place usually serves to distinguish its people and delineate the boundaries that separate them from other groups. By drawing on the common experience of the singularity of the place, the narrative emphasizes the *entitativity* (Campbell, 1958; Forsyth & Brunette, 2010) of the people related to it, and boosts the shared subjective perception that implies a certain sameness and homogeneity among its members, meaningfully bounded together as insiders, and, simultaneously, separated from the non-members and the outsiders. In other words, a strong sense or notion of ‘we-ness’ is, implicitly or explicitly, forged, fostered, conveyed and shared through this narrative, and a community of the like is identified or rather defined, based on the communality of the past and/or present social experience related to the place. By relying on vivid recollections and descriptions of a bulk of shared spatial experiences inseparably tied to the distinct characteristics of the place, this narrative provides them with the conception of a certain social collectivity to which they belong. Their shared spatial experience, in other words, becomes the source of the place-based collective identity of the group and the token of the group membership.

Socially produced and sustained, the narrative of uniqueness offers thereby a convenient and easily discernable ground for the construction of a collective place-based identity (Proshansky et al., 1983) for the group – a ground on which boundaries are drawn and distinctions are made. That is, the narrative of uniqueness that makes the place a meaningful object performs the social function of integrating the group and holding it together (Davis, 1979; Tajfel, 1978, 1981) at the same time as it distinguishes its members from non-member, insiders from outsiders. Moreover, the narrative also provides the members of this constructed community with a sense of *positive distinctiveness* (Turner, 1975; Vignoles et al., 2000), and thereby equips them with a yardstick for *social comparison* (Festinger, 1954), that is, a point of reference and a token of membership that can be used to determine who is to be included in and who is to be excluded from the group and how near or remote the excluded ones are.

To sum up, although unlike age, gender and/or ethnicity, place affinity has no immediate objective ground, it nonetheless has the potential to generate social categories that at times overshadow other lines of division, uniting people with many important differences and dividing them despite their otherwise significant similarities. Place in other words can yield cognitive schemes and principles of division and unity, affecting our perceptions and appreciations, and generating social categories that are invoked in defining ourselves and others. Like other schemes that structure social cognition, the resultant categories are complexity reducing devices that help people simplify their grasp of reality and their handling of it – categories that help people define the situations they end up in and, although purely constructed, can thereby become real in their consequences.

**A final note**

It seems that dramatic and unprecedented technological innovations have turned our world into a global village. It appears that, since our lives are no longer necessarily anchored in, and confined to, specific locations, place has become less relevant parameter of life. Given the liberating experience made possible by these innovations, for many
geography ‘is history,’ and to suggest that place matters sounds obsolete (de Blij, 2008, p. ix). Yet, places continue to have a significant impact on our lives or, to paraphrase de Blij (2008, p. xx), ‘geography still holds us in a relentless grip in that where we are all born shapes what we become and where we start our life journeys influences our destiny.’ Indeed, the place-people relationship appears to be a kind of connection that is reinforced in the times of flux when people apparently need even more a fixed point in their existence in order to preserve the continuity of their identities and to maintain some sense of ontological security (Morris, 1997). For instance, some literature on work and mobility has repeatedly stressed the ‘regional ‘stickiness of individuals, meaning that people generally prefer to stay in regions where they are settled and are rather reluctant to seek employment elsewhere, as they feel socially anchored in their home regions (Barcus & Brunn, 2009; Fischer et al., 1998; Fischer & Malmberg, 2001).

Against this backdrop, what seems to be needed is a sociological theory of place, which applies as much to a world in which the individuals’ self-identity depends primarily on locality as to one in which there exists a ‘generalized sense of homelessness’ (Said, 1979, p. 18). This represents a possible direction for future work, towards a theoretical framework that can address adequately the question as to how the place-people relationships can generate such powers that, especially in the hands of poets, intellectuals and politicians, can be turned into an effective means of arousing collective sentiments and mobilizing common actions in the name of the native place – sentiments and actions that not seldom are blemished by ‘reactionary and exclusionary xenophobia, racism and bigotry’ (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11).

Acknowledgements

For constructive comments on earlier versions of this article, the author is grateful to Richard Swedberg (Cornell University) and all the participants in the Higher Seminar at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University: Minoo Alinia, Christoffer Berg, Stina Bergman Blix, Hannah Bradby, Tom Chabosseau, Dominik Döllinger, Johan Fagerberg, Clara Iversen, Isis Lindfeldt, Miguel Martinéz, Vessela Misheva, Cecilia Nordquist and Emma von Essen.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Reza Azarian is Associate Professor in Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, Sweden. His research interests include sociological theory and economic sociology.

References


Rubinstein, R., & Parmelee, P. (1992). Attachment to place and the representation of the life course by the elderly. In I. Altman, & S. Low (Eds.), *Place attachment* (pp. 139–166). Plenum.


