

Place attachment



Photos: Marketta Kyttä

This lecture will be about place attachment. This is a concept that has attracted a lot of research interest within environmental psychology during the last years. If the earlier highly fashionable concept in environmental psychology was environmental restoration, now it is place attachment.

As you will learn or have already learned, many concepts and approaches in environmental psychology overlap. Among the themes that we study in this course, place attachment has clear links to restorative environments, aesthetic experiences and perhaps sense of community. Each of these themes still have varying theoretical and empirical traditions, therefore it is important that you are aware of them all

Place attachment

- focal concept in the people-place research
- emotional bond between a person and a particular geographical location

Place attachment has gained attention in several fields of social sciences. Besides environmental psychology, also in urban studies, sociology and human geography to mention a few. What interests researchers here are the ways people are attached to places and how places remain important to people despite the globalization, growing virtualization of everyday lives and easiness of mobility across regions, continents and the globe. People are still attached to places and can find happiness encountering or living at a particular place. Place attachment has been often studied by focusing on the experiences and meanings that individuals or groups of people form to places. Also the differences between individuals having certain types of meaning has been studied quite a lot. What has been less in the focus of the research is the place itself and especially the physical characteristics of places people are attached to. Place attachment has often been identified through different psychometric or self-report scales, but these measurement tools often fail to assess the spatial nature of the place bonds.

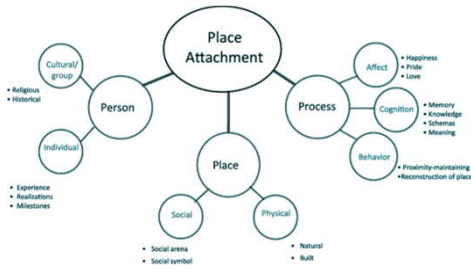
In empirical research place attachment has been operationalized for example by using concepts like favourite place, happy place or meaningful place.



Despite of the strong research interest towards studying the bonds between humans and places, this has not accompanied by advances in the theoretical and empirical aspects. Most researchers agree that the main reason for this lack of progress is the large number of concepts and measurements. In addition to place attachment there is a wide array of other concepts that come quite close, like sense of place and place identity. Each of these concepts have their own theoretical underpinnings and empirical traditions. This may feel a bit chaotic – it feels chaotic to me. I have to confess that place attachment has not been my favourite concept exactly because it feels chaotic and has not been well-defined.

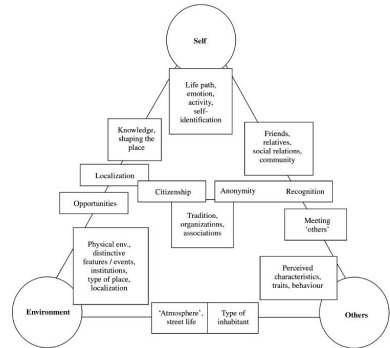
Already some twenty years ago some researchers paid attention to this conceptual chaos and pointed out the need to build more integrated approaches. Unfortunately this has not really happened.

Two conceptualizations of place attachment



Scannel, L. & Gifford, R. (2010)

Defining place attachment: A tripartite organizing framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30 (2010) 1–10.



Gustafson, P.E.R. (2001)

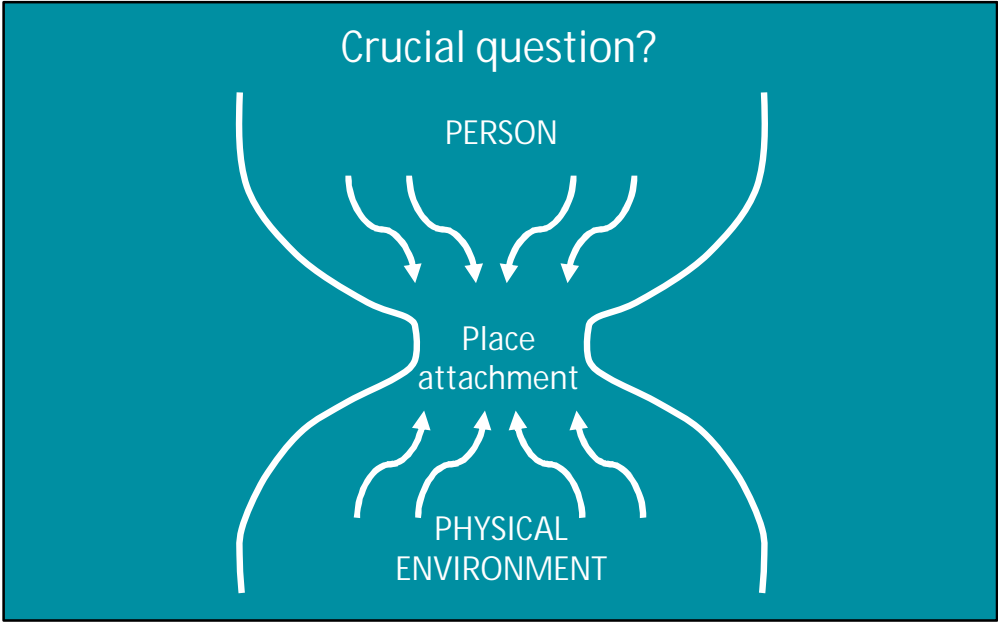
Meanings of place: Everyday experience and theoretical conceptualisations. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 21(1), 5–16.

As I said, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks developed around place attachment are numerous. Let me take two examples.

Among the most cited is the model by Scannel and Gifford who have proposed a three-dimensional framework of place attachment to structure the diverse definitions of the concept. This tripartite model suggests that place attachment is a multidimensional concept that is comprised of person, place and psychological process dimensions. I have a bit hard time understanding why person, place and process dimensions are here presented in such an unconnected and non-dynamic way.

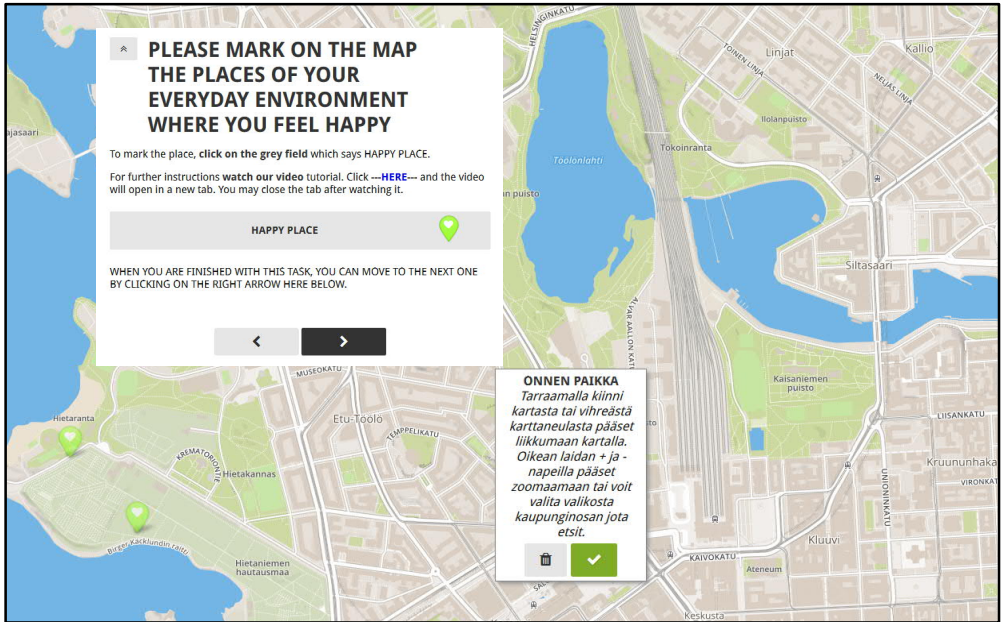
Another model by Gustafson ten years earlier is also a three-dimensional framework. In his model the three nodes are personal, social and physical. He pays attention to a network of relational place meanings with some meanings situated in the relationship between self, others and the environment. This synergistic process focuses on how mind-body-environment processes contribute to the development of one's attachment to place. I find this model quite a lot more interesting and dynamic than the previous model although it is older.

If you think about all existing models and approaches, you can say that the focus has been mainly on the person. However, if the concept of place attachment is all about the emotional bond BETWEEN a person and a place, then it seems a bit disconnecting to take these apart from each other and not to look at both. Very few studies have focused on the physical nature and spatial characteristics of the places that people are attached have tried to combine the personal and the physical when studying the place attachment. One reason for this lack of person and place approaches might be the lack of suitable methodologies.

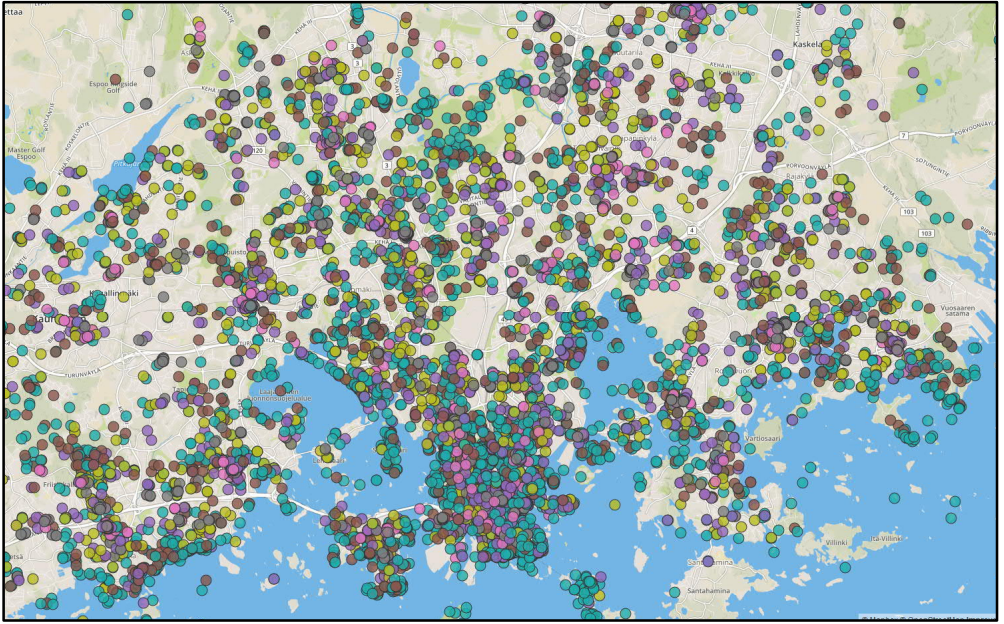


I would like to suggest that perhaps sometimes place attachment well more from the physical environment characteristics and other times more from the personal characteristics and experiences.

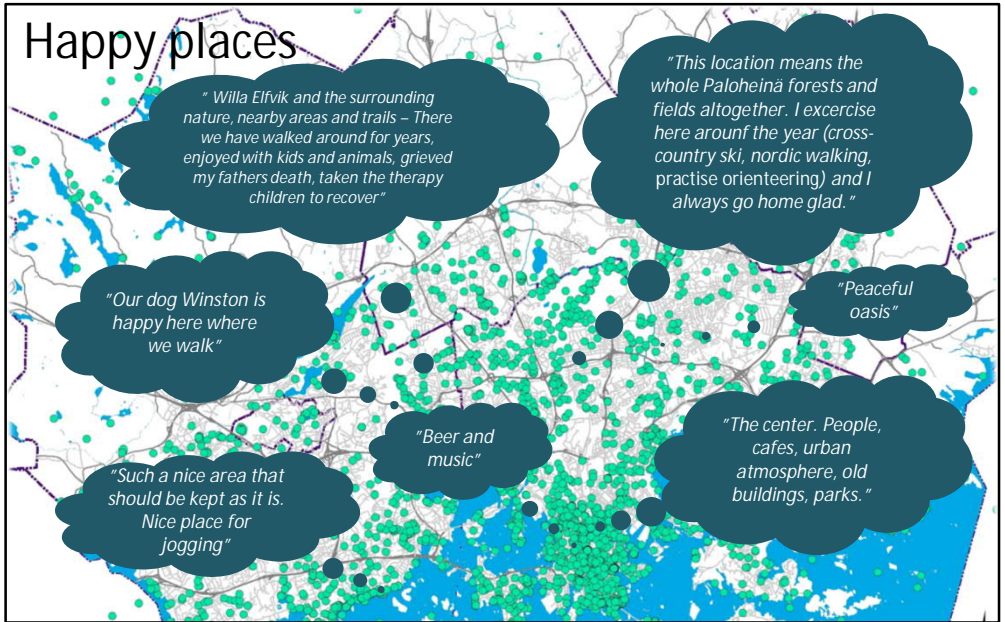
As I said before the study the physical nature of places people form bonds with has not received very much attention among researchers so far. For us, who are interested in planning and design this is an unfortunate situation.



To really be able to study the spatially bounded people-place-processes we need a methodology that allows to do that. As part of her PhD project about the urban structure that promotes healthy life of older adults, Tiina Laatikainen (nowadays Tiina Lähde) asked participants to mark their happy places on the map using a softGIS survey.



The participants marked on the map nearly 3200 happy places.



About 2300 of them included also short stories related to these places.

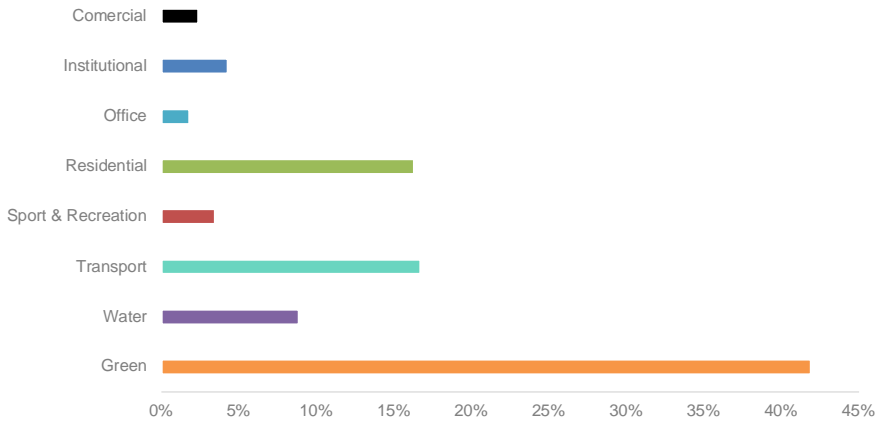
	How many times a theme was mentioned in the stories of happy places	%
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES	744	23 %
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT		
Social life	268	8 %
Appearance of the environment	722	22 %
Functional possibilities	1198	37 %
Atmosphere	307	9 %

The contents of these stories were analyzed from two perspectives: first from the personal perspective. All elements of stories were included to this category if people were talking about their personal memories or personal routines and preferences. The second perspective was related to the perceived characteristics of physical environment, like physical appearance or atmosphere of the place and social or functional quality. From the table you can see how these various perspectives were represented in the stories related to happy places.

You learn that personal perspectives cover about 23% of themes mentioned in the stories. The rest, 76% relate to the perceived characteristics of physical environment. We can conclude that it is a mistake to concentrate only on personal perspectives. Perhaps we can also conclude that this result is very interesting from the point of view of urban planning. The quality of physical environmental really matter!

Physical environment in older adults' happy places

The average amount (%) of land uses in the happy places of older adults



The objective physical environment characteristics of happy places can be analyzed as well. This was done by buffering the marked happy places with a 50 meter radius buffer. Within this buffer zone the proportion of various land use categories were analyzed. As you can see, the proportion of green infrastructure is on average very high, over 40% of the area around the happy places.

Happy places were located rather far away from home, on average 4,3 km away. 20% of the happy places were located at a distance between 1 and 2.5 km from home.

Urban park med vackra blomrabatter och flera bankar att sitta och se på andra.

Helsinki is the city of sea. Sea has always been an important element for me.

As a former dweller, the center when I like in the "countryside" by the border between Helsinki and Vantaa. Most often this visit means nowadays Espo surroundings but sometimes also Kallio.

the market place is full of life and international atmosphere. It is pleasant to walk around even if you are not going to buy anything.

0 50 100 200 Happy place marking

Sources: Esri, HERE, DeLorme, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, MapmyIndia, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, Esri, HERE, DeLorme, MapmyIndia, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS user community.

Let's finally take a closer look at happy places of older adults around Esplanad in the very centre of Helsinki.

Finally

Key blind spots in place attachment scholarship:

- (1) Sensory or immediately perceived meanings are not taken into account
- (2) Little attention is paid to how place meanings are the joint product of attributes of environmental features and the attributes of the individual
- (3) The assumption that the relationship between place attachment and behavior is linear and not constituted in dynamic relations among mind, culture, and environment.

Raymond, C.M. & Kyttä, M. (2017) Sense of place, fast and slow: The potential contributions of affordance theory to sense of place. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol 8, Article 1674, 1-14.

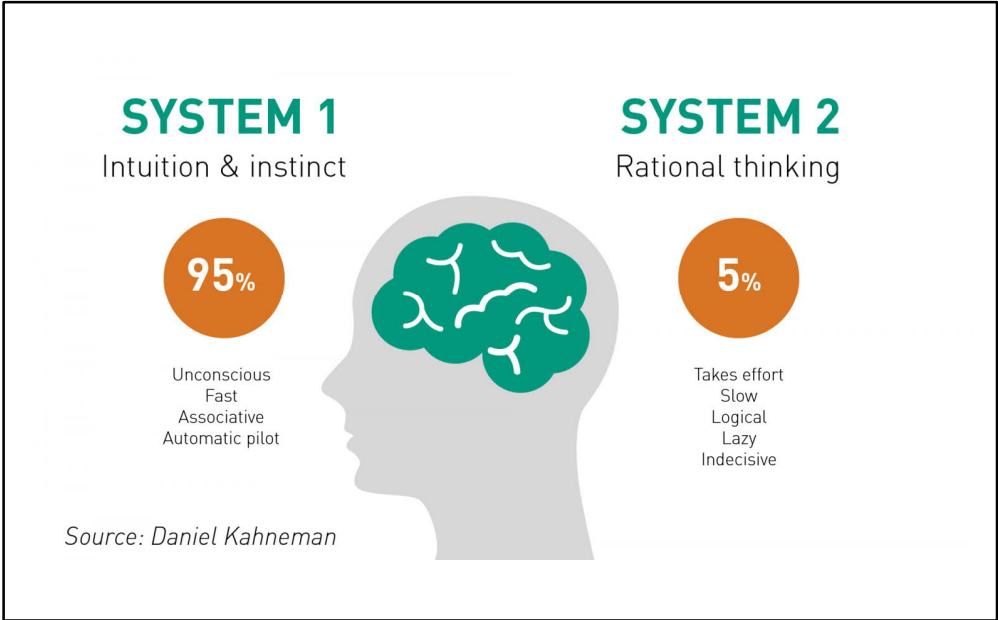
Let me finish by citing a few thoughts that we expressed together with Christopher Raymond a few years ago in our joint paper. Chris is by the way working in University of Helsinki in the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science.

Well, we argued that place attachment research has a few blind spots and those are these three aspects:

First: Sensory or immediately perceived meanings are not enough taken into account

Secondly: Little attention has been paid to the study how place meanings are at the same time related to the attributes of environmental features as well as attributes of the individual

Third: There is the assumption that the relationship between place attachment and behavior is linear and not constituted in dynamic relations among mind, culture, and environment.



Actually we were arguing that researchers have “privileged the slow.” Perhaps also direct and immediate perception–action processes can complement slower forms of social construction. These thoughts are much in line with the notions by Daniel Kahneman.

According to him, both slow and fast forms of cognition exist. Type 1 (or system 1) cognition is grounded in perception and intuition – thinking is fast, automatic, effortless, and associative, while Type 2 (system 2) thinking is grounded in reasoning – thinking is slow, serial, controlled, effortful, and rule-governed.

It has been empirically shown that System 1 is in charge 95% of the time. For that reason I think it is quite big problem that the system 1 related processes have not been paid attention in Place attachment literature.

And in fact, the same problem is present in many other key topics of environmental psychology...