

## MEANINGS OF PLACE: EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE AND THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

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### Abstract

This paper suggests an analytical framework for the understanding of what makes places meaningful. In an interview study, respondents were asked to list places they considered important and describe what these places meant to them. The analysis of the interviews indicates that meanings spontaneously attributed to places by the respondents can be mapped around and between the three poles of self, others and environment. In addition, a number of underlying dimensions of meaning emerge: distinction, valuation, continuity and change. The relationship between these results and earlier empirical research is discussed. The paper also points out that, to a great extent, the empirical findings converge with theoretical conceptualizations of place within social science. It therefore argues that the results of empirical studies need not be limited to 'special places', but may also, using the suggested analytical framework, contribute to more general empirical and theoretical discussions regarding the roles and meanings of place in contemporary society. © 2001 Academic Press

### Introduction

Meanings of place are an important issue in social science today. Arguments about modernity, post-modernity, globalization and the 'information society' often contain claims that the role of space and places in contemporary society is undergoing fundamental change. To some theorists, specific places become increasingly irrelevant. They argue that personal relationships (to places as well as to other persons) become less stable, and that more and more of personal experience and social relations become mediated by information and communication technologies, and thus disembedded from their local context (Meyrowitz, 1985; Giddens, 1991; cf. Hay, 1998). This echoes, to some extent, earlier phenomenological perspectives on place, claiming that modernity and internationalization produce 'placelessness', lacking sense of place and inauthentic physical environments (Relph, 1976). To others, globalization brings about localization (Robertson, 1995; Robertson & Khondker, 1998; Beck, 2000) and the ways in which people relate to places — mobility/cosmopolitanism or

immobility/localism — become an important expression of social stratification (Castells, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Albrow, 1997; Bauman, 1998). Such general theoretical arguments give rise to important questions about the roles and meanings of place in the everyday lives of women and men. They also raise questions about how such everyday experiences of place are related to the conceptualization of 'place' within social and behavioural science.

The purpose of this paper is to outline a tentative analytical framework for mapping and understanding the attribution of meaning to places. I will begin with a selective review of earlier theoretical and empirical research and will then present findings from a qualitative interview study. These findings, in a dialogue with the empirical research reviewed, form a framework that includes the respondents' spontaneous attributions of meaning as well as a number of underlying dimensions of meaning. Finally, I will briefly compare this framework with earlier theoretical conceptualizations of place and point at some implications for further research.

*Theoretical conceptualizations of place*

Relph (1976), in his influential work on place and placelessness, identifies three components of place: physical setting, activities and meanings. He argues, that of these three components, meanings is probably more difficult to grasp than the others, and yet it is of vital importance (*cf.* Tuan, 1977). Architects and planners, in not considering the meanings that places have to individuals and groups, run the risk of destroying authentic places and/or producing inauthentic ones (*cf.* Seamon, 1979; Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Relph, 1981). At about the same time, Canter (1977a) suggested a similar three-part model of place, derived from psychological studies. Place, according to this model, results from the relationship between actions, conceptions and physical attributes. In particular, Canter claims that the influence of physical attributes on psychological and behavioural processes deserves more attention. However, he also points out that individuals conceptualize places differently and that it is therefore important to consider places from the perspective of their 'users'.

More recently, Canter (1997) has developed a more complex 'facet theory', suggesting four interrelated facets of place: functional differentiation, place objectives, scale of interaction and aspects of design, each with a number of sub-categories. Functional differentiation points at activities and the aspects of design focus on physical characteristics of place, these two themes being already present in his earlier model. The facet of place objectives has some similarities with the 'conceptions' component of this model, but clarifies and extends it substantially by explicitly considering individual, social and cultural aspects of place experiences (*cf.* Canter, 2000). Finally, the facet of scale of interaction also adds to Canter's earlier framework by pointing out the importance of environmental scale.

Relph and Canter represent different disciplines and different scientific traditions. Relph, a phenomenologically oriented humanistic geographer, values authenticity and the particularity of specific places. Canter, a psychologist, sees place as a 'technical term' and considers Relph's notion of place to be 'romantic' (Canter, 1988, p. 10; see also Canter, 1977b, 1997; Relph, 1978). However, both of them attempt to identify the 'basic elements' or 'constituents' of place, and doing so, they arrive at theoretical models of place that have in fact important similarities (*cf.* Sime, 1986; Groat, 1995).

A model of place with a somewhat different perspective is provided by Agnew (1987). Investigating

how the concept of place has been used within social science, he finds three major elements: '*locale*, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); *location*, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and *sense of place*, the local 'structure of feeling'' (p. 28). In most research one of these three elements tends to predominate. Yet, in order to fully capture the meaning of place, Agnew argues that the complementarity of all three elements should be taken into account (see also Agnew & Duncan, 1989; Hallin, 1993). Thus, meaningful places emerge in a social context and through social relations, they are geographically located and at the same time related to their social, economic, cultural etc. surroundings, and they give individuals a sense of place, a 'subjective territorial identity' (Agnew, 1987).

Massey (1994, 1995) claims that much research regarding place is influenced by commonsensical notions of place that are conservative or even reactionary. Thus, places are depicted as having single, essential identities, based upon history and tradition, and the definition of a place all too often means drawing a boundary around it, separating the inside from the outside. Against these notions, Massey sets out to develop a more progressive concept of place, which is adapted to an era of 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 1989) and globalization. She goes further than Agnew in stressing that places are not isolated, but that they should always be regarded in relation to the outside world. What makes a place special, she argues, is not necessarily any intrinsic qualities of the locale itself — it may also be 'the particularity of linkage to that 'outside' which is therefore itself part of what constitutes the place' (Massey, 1994, p. 155). Thus, places appear as points of intersection, integrating the local and the global, creating a 'global sense of place'.

In addition, because of these relations with the surrounding world, places are not static. On the contrary, places are continually produced and reproduced in interaction with their surroundings and thus may acquire new meanings over a period of time (*cf.* Pries, 1996, 1999; Eade, 1997). Places, Massey (1994) argues, are not essences but processes, and places do not necessarily mean the same thing to everybody (*cf.* Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997). As much recent research points out, social conflicts often contain conflicting claims about places and their meanings, expressed in practice as well as in discourse (Keith & Pile, 1993;

Jess & Massey, 1995; Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Pile & Keith, 1997). This research highlights the social aspects of place indicated by Agnew (1987) by focusing on meanings of place generated within, and in conflicts between, social groups. Indeed, the uniqueness of a place may even arise from such conflicts and controversies.

What is the relationship between these theoretical conceptualizations of place and people's everyday experiences and notions of place? A growing body of empirical research about the meanings of places employs notions such as 'place identity' (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), 'place attachment' (Altman & Low, 1992; Milligan, 1998) and 'sense of place' (Shamai, 1991; Hay, 1998). However, much research in this area investigates 'special places' (Gifford, 1998) and is somewhat reluctant to suggest more general categories, models and theoretical frameworks. In the next section, I will review some empirical studies in this field, to see what has been said about meanings of place on a more general level.

#### *Meanings of place in empirical research*

Empirical research about meanings of place has focused on different kinds of places and used different methodological approaches. In a large study of some 300 interviews of Canadian cottagers, Jaakson (1986) investigates what recreation homes mean to their owners. He identifies ten 'broad themes of meaning': duality between routine and novelty, inversion of everyday life, back-to-nature, identity (identification with the location of the cottage, but also a 'cottager identity'), surety, continuity and sense of place, work, elitism among cottagers, aspirations that differ from those of the locals, and time/distance away from ordinary city life. Jaakson positions his study within the field of tourism research and believes that it may contribute to the understanding of second-home domestic tourism. In my view, several themes in his analysis also are important for the meanings of place more generally. Some of the themes, however, seem vague and at times overlapping, and some appear to belong to different analytical levels.

Kaltenborn also investigates the meanings of recreation homes (1997a, 1997b). In a questionnaire distributed to cottagers in Southern Norway, he operationalizes 'place attachment' and 'place attributes' in a number of statements. In the subsequent factor analysis, a somewhat diffuse 'area' factor turns out to be most important in explaining place attachment. This factor contains statements such as

'This is my favourite place in my time off' and 'This area means a lot to me'. A second factor involves statements about the recreation home itself and a 'history' factor gathers statements such as 'My family has a long lasting attachment to this area'. As for 'place attributes', Kaltenborn identifies two important factors: 'nature-culture', regarding the place as a natural environment, a cultural landscape, etc., and 'family-social', concerning family life at the recreational home and social relations in the area. These latter findings mirror a common distinction between physical and social aspects in theoretical conceptualizations of place (*cf.* Agnew, 1987). His place attachment factors, on the other hand, appear to be very vague, and Kaltenborn, just as Jaakson, seems to lack a systematic framework for his analysis.

A paper by Sixsmith (1986), investigating the meanings attributed to 'home' by a number of British university students, suggests precisely such a framework. Using qualitative as well as quantitative methods she finds, to begin with, some 20 different meanings of home. Further analysis indicates that these meanings may be grouped under three broad categories, or 'experiential modes' — personal, social and physical (see Table 1). Despite some limitations, Sixsmith's study thus produces a more general framework for her findings than either Jaakson or Kaltenborn; her paper provides a valuable point of departure for further investigations into the meanings of place. As Groat (1995) points out, Sixsmith's experiential modes have some resemblance to the earlier three-part definitions of place suggested by Relph (1976) and Canter (1977a); *cf.* also Sack (1992) and Canter (1997). However, these models try to describe the 'basic elements' or 'constituents' of place. Sixsmith, for her part, is concerned with her respondents' subjective attribution of meaning.

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) use a different approach in their interview study of place and identity processes among residents in the London Docklands. In a creative adaptation of identity theory, they investigate in what ways the place attachment of their respondents expresses the principles of identity described by Breakwell (1986, 1992):

- (1) *Distinctiveness*: respondents use place identification to distinguish themselves from others;
- (2) *Continuity*: the place provides a sense of continuity of the self, as respondents have lived at the same place for a long time, or have lived at the same *type* of place (*cf.* Feldman, 1990);

TABLE 1  
*Meanings of 'home' — three experiential modes, after Sixsmith (1986, p. 289)*

Personal	Social	Physical
Happiness	Type of relationship	Structure
Belonging	Quality of relationship	Services
Responsibility	Friends and entertainment	Architecture
Self-expression	Emotional environment	Work environment
Critical experiences	With others	Spatiality
Permanence		
Privacy		
Time		
Meaningful places		
Knowledge		
Desire to return		

(3) *Self-esteem*: respondents feel proud of the place where they live;

(4) *Self-efficacy*: qualities of the residential area facilitate respondents' everyday life in various ways.

In their analysis, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell demonstrate that these principles of identity are strongly related to their respondents' local attachment. In addition, I believe that they allow a deeper understanding of some of the themes and categories of meaning found by, for example, Jaakson, Kaltenborn and Sixsmith. This is an important contribution to place theory, although the focus on identity does not, in my view, fully capture how meaning is attributed to places.

Finally, meaningful places may be of different spatial scale — residence, local community or neighbourhood, city, region, country, etc. (Tuan, 1977; Paasi, 1986; Zelizer, 1993; Canter, 1997; Gifford, 1998) — but the meanings and relative importance of places may differ. Kaltenborn (1997b) finds different levels of place attachment when comparing three different 'geographical scales'. However, Shamai (1991), in measuring the sense of place for city, region and nation (in Toronto, Canada), finds a strong positive relationship between respondents' sentiments toward each of these places. A study by Cuba and Hummon (1993), comparing identification with dwelling, community and region, indicates that certain socio-demographic variables may explain what spatial level(s) respondents consider to be meaningful (see also Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

### Method

The empirical research presented here takes the form of an interview study, designed to investigate in a highly exploratory way, what places of various

kinds may mean to people, and how people relate to places.

The sample consisted of 14 respondents living in Western Sweden who were recruited through personal contacts (*cf.* Repstad, 1993, pp. 62–63). The sampling procedure resembled Trost's (1986, 1993) recommendations for strategic nonrepresentative sampling. The objective of this approach is not to draw a statistically representative sample, but to obtain a wide range of variation in the responses through the strategic consideration of variables or factors expected to produce variation in the phenomenon being studied. In this investigation, gender, age, educational/professional background, place of residence and life path were considered in the sampling process, as these factors were expected to be associated with differing experiences of place. However, in order to avoid the sample being too large, not all of the factor combinations were included.

Seven of the respondents were women and seven were men. The ages ranged from 18 to 71 years (average age 46 years) and the respondents lived in different parts of Western Sweden (two in small villages, six in small towns, six in big or medium-sized cities). Their life paths differed (moved a lot, lived a long time in the same area, worked abroad, etc.) as well as their employment (the sample also included one student, one unemployed and two retired persons).

Taped interviews of 1–3 h duration were carried out by the researcher, either in the home of the respondent or in some other locale that she or he found convenient. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were made, although in a few cases stories clearly beside the subject were omitted.

The interviews were semi-structured, with questions focusing on two major themes. Firstly, the respondents were asked to list the places where they

had lived throughout their lives and places that had been important to them in some other way (e.g. places where they used to go on holiday, visit friends, etc.). These lists of places were then used for discussions about which places were considered by the respondents to be important and what these places meant to them. Secondly, the respondents were given a written question, asking them to indicate their level of attachment (not close at all, not so close, close, very close) to five spatial levels (their community/village, their city, their county, Sweden, Europe); the respondents were then asked to describe what these 'places' of different spatial scale meant to them and why they were more or less attached to them.

During the analysis, the interview transcripts were read a number of times and coded in order to arrive at themes and typologies describing the respondents' attribution of meaning to place (*cf.* Layder, 1993, ch. 7). Initially, the coding was highly descriptive and the codes were often labelled with words used by the respondents to describe what places meant to them (e.g. 'work', 'friends', 'buildings', 'nature', 'opportunities', 'change'). These descriptive codes were gradually converted into broader categories. For example, 'buildings' and 'nature' were categorized under 'physical environment' (*cf.* Strauss & Corbin, 1990, on 'open coding'). As this process of abstraction proceeded, a limited number of even more general themes emerged. Some of them were, quite early in the analysis, brought together in a tentative model, which seemed useful for categorizing or (later) mapping different sub-themes. A few other themes did not fit neatly into this model, but seemed to organize the attribution of meaning on a deeper level.

Thus, the analysis of the interviews produced firstly a model mapping the meanings spontaneously attributed to places by the respondents, and secondly, a number of underlying themes, describing *how* the attribution of meaning occurred rather than *what* meanings were attributed. At a later stage, the themes and typologies derived from the empirical data were compared to earlier research; this inspired some minor conceptual revision and clarification. In a few cases, simple quantifications and cross-tabulations were also made in order to test the preliminary findings in the qualitative analysis (*cf.* section on *Places of different scale* below).

The analysis, as well as the preceding sampling procedure, was aimed at analytical and not statistical generalization (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994; Kvale, 1996). Thus, the objective was not to make generalizations from a statistically represen-

tative sample, but to obtain, through the sampling procedure, a wide range of variation in the empirical data and then search for analytical categories, typologies and models that could capture this variation. In the following, I will also try to validate the findings by relating them to earlier empirical and theoretical research.

## Analysis and discussion

### *Self, others and environment*

Early on in the analysis, three broad themes appeared to be useful for classifying the various themes of meaning found in the interviews: *self*, *others* and *environment*. Further analysis convinced me, however, that the meanings of place expressed by the respondents were often situated in the relationship between self, others and/or environment, rather than unambiguously belonging to just one of these categories. Instead of a three-part division, I therefore settled for a three-pole triangular model within which various meanings of place could be mapped — not only at the three poles, but also in-between them (see Figure 1). The meanings of place expressed by my interviewees may then, very briefly, be grouped as follows.

*Self.* Places often have highly personal meanings. An important theme here is the life path of the individual: places where the respondents have lived for long periods or to which they have returned many times, are associated with roots and continuity. The life path theme is often related to important life stages — childhood, adolescence, parenthood — and expressed in terms of experience and memories. Another theme of meaning is emotion. In particular, many respondents associate their place of residence with security and a sense of home. A third theme linking self to place is that of activity, where places are associated with the respondents' work or leisure activities. Finally, places are also described as a source of self-identification (*cf.* Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Respondents describe using the place of residence for telling others who they are, sometimes also feeling that they 'represent' their town, region or country.

*Self-others.* Another important category of meanings is the relationship between self and others. Places often become meaningful because of the respondents' relations with people living there — friends, acquaintances, relatives — and the sense of community that such social relations create. A

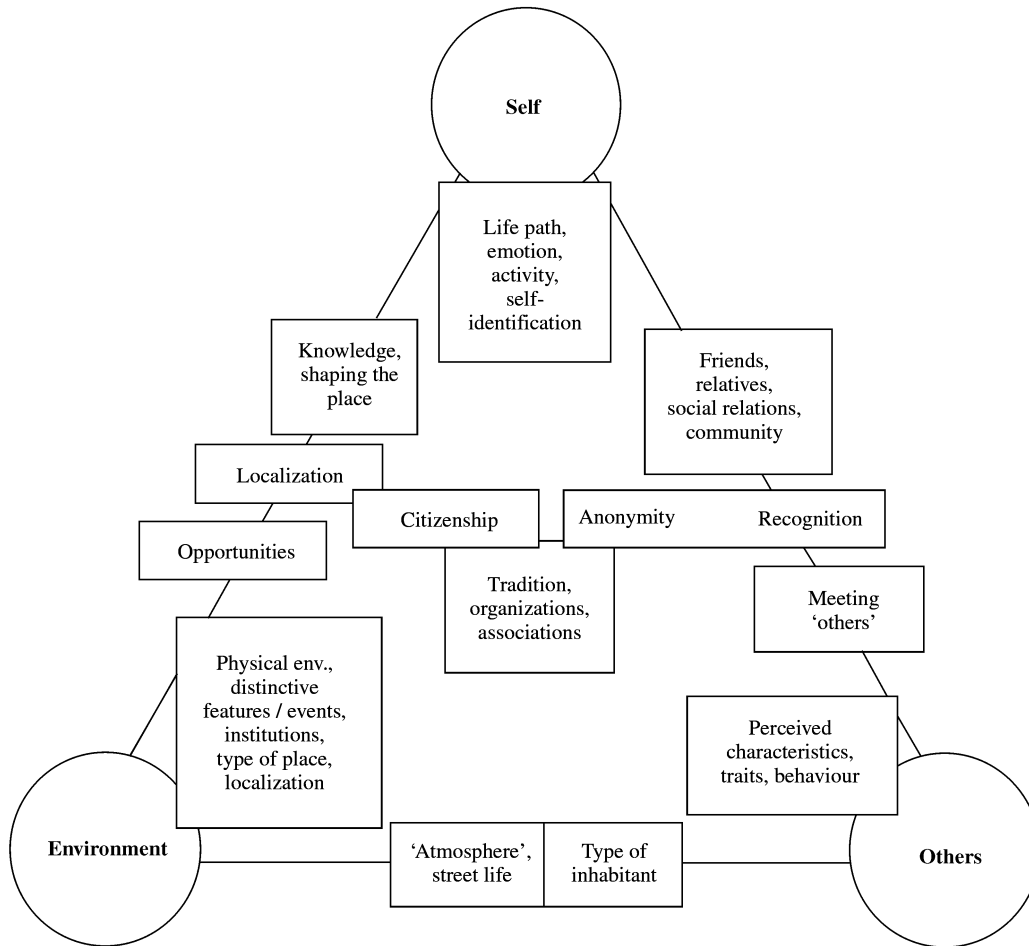


FIGURE 1. Meanings of place spontaneously attributed by the respondents.

similar theme is recognition, being recognized by and recognizing others in the neighbourhood, and its opposite, anonymity. Anonymity is sometimes expressed as a relationship between self and others, sometimes also as a self-environment relation. In addition, some places (often distant ones) are associated with meetings with others, being perceived as foreign or in some way different.

*Others.* Places may also be associated with 'others' without reference to any social relations or encounters. In these cases, places are attributed meaning through the perceived characteristics, traits and behaviours of their inhabitants. The numerous statements within this category tend to be quite stereotypical and are often based on explicit comparisons between 'us'/'here' and 'them'/'there'. However, in a few cases respondents explicitly rejected such generalizations pointing out that the inhabitants of a place are not necessarily a homogenous group.

*Others-environment.* A few themes, often somewhat difficult to categorize, may be located between the poles of 'others' and 'environment'. Several respondents discuss the 'atmosphere', the 'climate', or the street-life of a place (usually a city) in such a way that properties of the inhabitants come to characterize the urban environment itself. In a similar way, a place may be associated with a certain type of inhabitant — e.g. immigrants, thus making it an 'immigrant suburb'.

*Environment.* Very often, meanings of place depend neither on the self, nor on the relations with or perceptions of others. I have tentatively labelled this pole 'environment'. A large number of statements in the interviews concern the physical environment, including the natural environment and various natural conditions (weather, seasons), as well as the built environment. Likewise, distinctive features and events associated with a place may also be important. In these cases, meaning is often attributed to

the place not only as a physical environment, but also as a symbolic or historical environment. A third important theme is the institutional environment. Places are often associated with various political/democratic institutions and institutional practices. This is most clearly expressed in the case of countries, but the theme is also present on a local and regional level. Sometimes, a place is identified as a certain 'type' of place (e.g. industrial town, farming area). Finally, places are described with reference to their localization, their nearness or distance to other places.

*Environment–self.* Meanings of place may also concern the relationship between self and environment. This relationship is often based on the respondents' knowledge of the place. Some refer to a formal knowledge (geographical, historical), others value their familiarity with their lived-in physical environment. A related theme concerns the shaping of the physical environment by the interviewees themselves, e.g. by building or repairing the houses they live in or by cultivating their land. In addition, the environment is often perceived as being meaningful because it offers the respondents various kinds of opportunities — opportunities to perform certain activities, to feel or experience something desirable, opportunities for personal development. The opposite, i.e. places regarded as constraining and lacking in opportunities, also exists. Another kind of relationship between self and environment (institutional environment this time) is that of citizenship. Sometimes, however, citizenship may be expressed in terms of participation and thus also concerns 'others'. There is also a 'localization' theme in the environment–self relationship, i.e. when the localization of a place is not related to other places but to the respondent — close or far away, easy or difficult to reach.

*Self–others–environment.* Finally, some themes involve all three poles of the self–others–environment model. As already noted, anonymity and citizenship are two themes that sometimes involve all three poles, although not always. Two other themes do so more clearly. Traditions, festivals and anniversaries often implicate self, others and various environments (local as well as national). Similarly, when the respondents' membership in spatially defined associations or organizations makes the place meaningful, it is clear that self, others (other members) and the environment (geographical and sometimes institutional) contribute to the overall meaning of place.

Thus, the interviews reveal a large number of meanings that places may have. Not all places mean the same to everybody; indeed, some respondents clearly state that they do not consider certain meanings relevant. In particular, some of the interviewees regarded places (mainly cities, villages, etc.) as mere physical environments, not related to who 'happens' to live there or what they themselves 'happen' to do and experience there. The three-pole model depicted in Figure 1 does not therefore pretend that everybody attributes the same meanings to places. Neither does it pretend that all (kinds of) places have the same meanings. The model is an attempt to capture this variation in the spontaneously attributed meanings of place.

A comparison with the empirical studies referred to earlier (Jaakson, 1986; Sixsmith, 1986; Kaltenborn, 1997a) reveals that several themes appearing in this analysis were also identified in these studies. Two qualifications should be made here. Firstly, that the themes of meaning described above and shown in the model (Figure 1) are quite broad themes, abstracted from a wide range of specific meanings of place present in the data. Yet, even this range of meanings should not be regarded as exhaustive, given the fairly limited number of interviews conducted. Secondly, their positions within the model reflect their analytic relationship to each other, not any indices, scales or other quantitative measures. However, the important point I want to make here is not about the specific items of meaning, or about their exact positions in the model, but concerns the usefulness of the self–others–environment scheme itself as an analytical model for mapping the meanings of place emerging from an investigation of spontaneous notions of place.

The three poles of this model have important similarities with the three 'experiential modes' previously described by Sixsmith (1986). The 'self' theme has much in common with her 'personal' meanings of place, just as the 'others' theme resembles her 'social' category. Yet, when it comes to places more foreign than the home (as in Sixsmith's study), the 'others' that give these places meaning are not always involved in social relationships with the interviewees. At the third pole, the term 'environment' is broader than the 'physical' category suggested by Sixsmith. It includes not only the place as a physical environment, but also as a symbolic, historical, institutional and geographical environment (in fact, some of the themes grouped under Sixsmith's 'physical' mode are not limited to the physical environment either). In addition, in the model suggested here, meanings of place are not forced into three

discrete categories but mapped around and between the three poles of self, others and environment. I believe that such a model provides a richer and more flexible framework for capturing the manifold meanings of place, than the three-part division suggested by Sixsmith.

### *Places of different scale*

So far, I have been trying to identify models and concepts encompassing the wide range of meanings of place present in my interview data, and through abstraction, I have tried to arrive at common categories of meaning. However, different kinds of places are given different kinds of meaning and I believe that the analytical framework derived from my analysis may be useful in the investigation of such differences. As an illustration, I will briefly examine the difference between places of differing spatial scale.

The interviews dealt with very different kinds of places — from residence and neighbourhood to nations and even continents (mostly ‘Europe’). Not surprisingly, these various places were often attributed with different meanings. The analysis indicated that small places were often given meanings situated at the *self* pole of the model or in the self’s relations with others and/or the environment. On the other hand, larger places seemed to be more often associated with *others* or with various aspects of the *environment*, without any direct reference to the respondents.

A tentative classification and quantification was made to test these preliminary findings. The coded text segments from the interview transcripts were divided into two categories: self-related meanings and other meanings. The first category contained those meanings of place belonging to the ‘self’, ‘self–others’, ‘self–environment’ and ‘self–others–environment’ themes described above. The second category contained the themes of ‘others’, ‘others–environment’ and ‘environment’. The relative distri-

bution of the coded text segments between these two categories is presented in Table 2 and lends clear support to the preliminary findings. Smaller places (town or city, and even more markedly residence/neighbourhood/village) are mainly attributed with self-related meanings, whereas meanings related to others and/or environment, predominate for larger places (region, nation, continent).

Previous research has shown that the degree of place attachment may differ between places of differing spatial scale (Kaltenborn, 1997b) and that socio-demographic variables may explain what spatial level becomes salient for individual self-identification (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The investigation presented here also indicates that places of different spatial scale may be attributed with different meanings and that the suggested three-pole model may be useful for mapping such differences (*cf.* Canter, 1997, pp. 127–128).

The interviews and the subsequent analyses were not primarily made with this kind of classification and quantification in mind. All the statements in the interviews are not easily attributable to one specific spatial level; in addition, one purpose of the three-pole model is indeed to avoid simplified categorization and to allow analyses that recognize the plurality and complexity of meanings. Table 2 should therefore be interpreted with some caution. However, the cross-tabulation does indicate that the three-pole model might also be used in more formal research designs, for the formulation and testing of hypotheses.

### *Underlying dimensions*

Importantly, however, the self–others–environment model should not be the end of the analysis. In going beyond the respondents’ spontaneous attribution of meaning, a number of underlying dimensions of meaning emerge; these I have tentatively labelled

TABLE 2  
*Meanings of place and types of place, percentage distribution of coded text segments in the interviews*

	Residence/neighbourhood/village	Town/city	Region	Nation	Continent
Self-related meanings	77	59	38	31	32
Other meanings	23	41	62	69	68
Total	100	100	100	100	100
	<i>n</i> =262	<i>n</i> =339	<i>n</i> =77	<i>n</i> =185	<i>n</i> =37



*distinction, valuation, continuity* and *change*. These themes cannot easily be mapped within the triangular model previously described, as they organize the attribution of meaning to places in more basic ways. At times, the respondents also explicitly refer to these themes, but often they are rather implicit, not reflected upon, or taken for granted.

*Distinction.* A meaningful place must appear as an identifiable, distinguishable territorial unit. Distinction is a basic feature of human (and social) cognition (Zerubavel, 1991, 1997, ch. 4) and is a matter of categorization, ascription of similarities and differences, and the drawing of boundaries. In the interviews conducted, distinctions are often expressed in terms of 'here'/'there', 'at home'/'away' and sometimes extend to the inhabitants of the places, 'us'/'them'. Importantly, similarities as well as differences may contribute to the distinction of place, as distinction is not only about establishing the uniqueness of the place, but also about categorization, about telling what *kind* of place it is (see also Feldman, 1990), and thus what it has in common with other places.

*Valuation.* The comparisons underlying the distinction of places often have a normative component; they involve a valuation — positive or negative — of the places and sometimes of their inhabitants. The valuation aspect is often important in making places meaningful; a strong or weak, positive or negative valuation may influence the level of personal involvement in specific places. Thus, even places whose meanings are not primarily related to the self, but to others and/or to aspects of the environment, may have a kind of personal importance for the respondents by being strongly positively or negatively valued.

*Continuity.* Meanings of place also often involve a temporal dimension. This is explicit in the 'life path' theme as mentioned above, where places become connected to the life path of the individual through origin, length of residence, important events or life stages, or frequent visits. Continuity is thus an important aspect of 'self'-related meanings of place (*cf.* Hay, 1998). However, there are also important elements of continuity in, for example, place-bound social relations, place as a historical environment and local traditions. Just as with distinction and valuation, continuity is also an underlying dimension to the attribution of meaning to place, not being limited to any one of the poles or relationships in the self-others-environment model.

*Change.* The temporal dimension also implies the possibility of change. Over time, places may acquire

new meanings, sometimes because of external events or developments, sometimes through the conscious efforts of the respondents. In this perspective, place and meanings of place stand forth as an ongoing process. Indeed at times, the respondents take an active part in the process of giving places meaning. They try to make places 'their own' by forging social relations (e.g. visiting neighbours), by acquiring knowledge about the place, or by physically shaping the place. In these cases, places could be described in terms of personal projects; places may indeed even become collective projects, through people's participation in local social movements (*cf.* Jess & Massey, 1995).

This interplay of continuity and change clearly shows that meanings of place are not given once and for all. Instead, a meaningful place appears as a process, where various individual (and collective) projects converge and/or compete with other projects, with external events, and with the course of time. Various long-established meanings of place often impose restrictions on these projects, but the projects may, if successful, gradually alter or modify these established meanings.

The underlying dimensions of meaning emerging in my analysis have important similarities with the factors used by Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) in their study on place identity. However, the perspectives of these two studies differ. In my study, the question is how people attribute meaning to places, while Twigger-Ross and Uzzell investigate how people use places to construct a self-identity. For them, distinctiveness is a matter of using places for self-identification; for me, *distinction* is about the basic cognitive act of distinguishing places. Similarly, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell discuss self-esteem — place as a source for positive *valuation* of the self — while I consider the valuation (positive or negative) of places. In their analysis, *continuity* refers to 'continuity of the self' (1996, p. 208), while, as I have shown above, the 'continuity' theme in my analysis is not limited to the self. As for *change*, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell briefly mention it but do not explicitly integrate it into their analysis. Nevertheless, it is clear that the principles they suggest for analysing place-related self-identity may also, with some further elaboration, be useful in understanding the attribution of meaning to place more generally.

## Conclusion

The two-stage qualitative analysis of the interviews combined with the use of earlier research produced

a tentative analytical framework for understanding meanings of place. The initial stage of the analysis brought forth a wide range of spontaneously attributed meanings of place; these meanings were mapped in a three-pole model of *self*, *others* and *environment*. It is important to remember that these three poles should not be regarded as a three-part categorization, as meanings of place may also be situated in the relationships between the poles. In order to illustrate the applicability of the model, a comparison was made between places of different spatial scale. This comparison indicated that small places are primarily given self-related meanings, whereas the opposite holds true for larger places. At a second analytical stage, a number of underlying dimensions of meaning were also identified. The attribution of meaning involves *distinction* — the definition of similarities and differences, and therefore often comparisons with other places. *Distinction* is also often associated with a positive or negative *valuation* of places. *Continuity* and *change* introduce a temporal dimension, in which places may be regarded as processes; the reproduction of existing meanings as well as the creation of new ones, at times, appears as the outcome of individual and/or collective projects.

The analytical framework elaborated here is, to a certain extent, supported by earlier empirical research. Several specific themes of meaning identified in the analysis have been found in other studies (e.g. Jaakson, 1986; Sixsmith, 1986; Kaltenborn, 1997a), the three-pole model may be regarded as a development of the classification of 'experiential modes' as suggested by Sixsmith (1986), and the underlying dimensions of meaning bear some resemblance with the principles of place identity as elaborated by Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996).

Interestingly however, the suggested framework also has much in common with earlier *theoretical* conceptualizations of place. Relph (1976) and Canter (1977a) discuss meanings or conceptualizations of place and point out their interrelation with physical characteristics (*environment*) and activities (of '*self*' and/or '*others*') associated with place. Canter's later (1997, 2000) writings add to these conceptualizations by integrating (in the 'facet' of place objectives) individual, social and cultural aspects of place. The individual aspects point at self-related meanings; the social aspects indicate the importance of self–others relationships. The cultural aspects may involve meanings related to environment (e.g. symbolic environment, historical environment), to others and possibly, following Canter's account, even to self (aspects of place fostering cultural identity).

Agnew (1987), for his part, discusses (1) the place as a locale, a setting for social interaction; (2) the place as a geographical location, defined by interaction with its surroundings; and (3) the inhabitants' sense of place. This division also has important similarities with the self–others–environment model suggested above. The first aspect concerns relations between self and others, the second aspect points to the environment pole in my model and the third aspect is about self.

Agnew's second aspect also stresses that places are relational as they acquire meaning through their relations with other places. This is also an important point in Massey's (1994, 1995) conceptualization of place. The *distinction* theme in my analysis captures this point to a certain extent, underlining that places are often attributed meaning in comparison with other places through the definition of similarities and differences. Massey tries to avoid essentialism by stressing that places should be regarded as processes; this point is also reflected in the interplay between *continuity* and *change* in my analysis and in the competition between various meaning-generating projects that continually reproduce or alter meanings of place. The latter perspective also points at another important theme for Massey — that a place may not mean the same thing(s) to everybody and that meanings of place may even emerge from conflicts about how places should be defined. Such conflicts will involve different *valuations* of meanings and places.

Thus, the meanings of place emerging from the empirical investigation converge in important respects with theoretical conceptualizations of place. This, in my view, supports my argument that empirical studies, although investigating specific places, need not always limit themselves to the 'specific', but that they may also contribute to more general discussions about the roles and meanings of place in contemporary society (*cf.* Morley, 1991; May, 1996; Eade, 1997; Canter, 2000; Hjerm, 2000).

The framework outlined in this paper provides analytical tools for further research about meanings of place and may also give rise to fruitful research questions and hypotheses. It could be used for mapping the meanings of specific places and for systematically comparing what meanings a place has for different groups or social categories — e.g. women and men, socio-economic categories, generations, ethnic groups, long-term residents and newcomers. It might also be used for investigating meanings of place more generally. Today, social scientists are vigorously debating globalization and localization (Castells, 1996; Featherstone, 1996;

Bauman, 1998), territoriality and what Massey (1994) labels 'a global sense of place', local and cosmopolitan orientations and ideals (Hannerz, 1996; Gesser & Olofsson, 1997; Werbner, 1999) and so forth. What do such notions of place imply in terms of meanings related to self–others–environment and in terms of the underlying dimensions of distinction, valuation, continuity and change? In what ways may globalization and 'time-space compression' influence what places mean to people and how the attribution of meaning occurs? Do meanings of place differ between people and places, which are more or less integrated in (or exposed to) various kinds of global or transnational processes — social, cultural, political, economic? Further empirical research along these lines may substantially contribute to current debates.

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### Notes

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