



Think global, act local? The relevance of place attachments and place identities in a climate changed world

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ABSTRACT

Two decades ago, an article was published in *Global Environmental Change* proposing the importance of place attachments, at local and global scales, for understanding human responses to climate change (Feitelson, 1991). Despite concluding that 'studies of individual's attachment to place may provide important inputs for strategies to enhance the prospects for sharing the globe' (p. 406, 1991), the article remains overlooked. This article takes up and extends Feitelson's argument for more systematic research on place attachments and climate change. First, the paper critically reviews interdisciplinary literature on place attachment and the related concept of place identity, drawing on scholarship in human geography, environmental and social psychology. The review identifies a lack of cross-disciplinary dialogue, as well as several limitations to the ways that scalar aspects have been researched. Second, climate change research, encompassing adaptation, mitigation and communication that has incorporated place related attachments and identities is critically reviewed; in particular, emerging research on the role of 'psychological distance' is critiqued. The article concludes with five recommendations for future research: to capture place attachments and identities at global as well as local scales; to integrate qualitative and quantitative methods that capture constructions of place as well as intensity of attachments and identifications; to investigate links between attachments, identities and collective actions, particular 'NIMBY' resistance to adaptation and mitigation strategies; to apply greater precision when investigating spatial frames of risk communication; and to investigate links between global attachments and identities, environmental worldviews and climate change engagement. Finally, the implications of such research for evaluating area-based climate interventions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The presentation of compelling evidence of changes to the earth's climate arising from human activities (IPCC, 2007) has led to calls for urgent mitigating actions as well as adaptation to a spectrum of environmental changes including sea level rise, warming temperatures, ocean acidification and shrinking ice. Two decades ago, Feitelson (1991) published an article in *Global Environmental Change* that made two distinct contributions. First, he proposed that research on human responses to global environmental change had neglected attachments to place, defined as emotional bonds that arise from familiarity, a sense of belonging or ideology that play a role in motivating individuals to attend to, care for and take actions on behalf of particular places. Second, Feitelson argued that such attachments could be felt not only at the local level (i.e. to the neighbourhood where people live), but at the global level. In effect, he proposed that the whole world could be conceived as a place that could be an object of feelings of

attachment. He argued that voluntary actions on climate change would be fostered by strengthening attachments to place at the global level and speculated that global attachment is likely to be strengthened by mass media, international tourism and a potential decline in intensity of attachments to nation states. He concluded by stating '*the evidence on this topic is mostly anecdotal, and more systemic work is badly needed*' (1991, 405).

This article takes up and extends Feitelson's arguments for the relevance of place attachments to understand human responses to climate change. Literatures from several social science disciplines are drawn upon in which concepts of place, attachment and identity are fundamental, notably human geography, environmental psychology and social psychology. In doing so, the article supports Hulme (2008) broader argument that climate change should be conceived as a situated phenomenon, implicating relationships between people and places, rather than being conceived as a 'purified', decontextualized system of abstract knowledge. Although Feitelson's emphasis upon place attachments supports a situated perspective on climate change, conceiving attachments to place at the global scale is at odds with 'localist' discourses on environmental problems that have acquired something of the status of common sense in recent years,

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presuming that individuals attend to and value only what is spatially and temporally immediate. Such a discourse is repeatedly emphasised in literature on human aspects of environmental problems, including the influential Limits to Growth report (Meadows et al., 1972, cited in Barr, 2008), research on sustainable communities (e.g. Bridger and Luloff, 1999), the concept of ‘psychological distance’ in relation to climate change (Milfont, 2010) and empirical research on perceived barriers to public engagement (Lorenzoni et al., 2007). Hulme’s critique of natural science readings of climate change suggests a similar localism: “*by constructing climate change as a global problem, one that is distanced and un-situated relative to an individual’s mental world, we make it easy for citizens to verbalise superficial concern with the problem, but a concern belied by little enthusiasm for behavioural change*” (2008, 8). But are global renderings of climate change necessarily ‘distanced’ and ‘un-situated’ relative to individuals’ mental worlds? Could behavioural change arise from global as well as local concerns? More broadly, how is climate change framed and understood in terms of spatiality – as a global problem, a national or a local problem? As none of these? And with what implications for public engagement?

Jasanoff has argued that ‘*climate change, too, can be linked to a place, but that place is the whole Earth . . . Ideas of belonging and stewardship can develop on a planetary scale: the slogan ‘think globally, act locally’ affirms both the possibility and the promise of connecting global issues back to more personal scales of meaning*’ (2010, 241). In a similar vein, Heise was critical of environmental educators who presume that global scale environmental problems must be reduced to local manifestations (2008), instead arguing that human responses to climate change should be based upon a ‘sense of planet’ as much as a sense of place. These arguments, which necessarily entwine human responses to climate change with concepts of place and scale, matter because, as Herod has observed ‘*the spatial resolutions at which social processes take place and are perceived to take place, have significant implications for understanding our world*’ (2011, xiv). Can individuals form relations of belonging and stewardship to the whole Earth, and not just to the locality where people live? Under what situations? With what consequences? If, as Feitelson argued (1991), people can feel a sense of belonging not just to their own backyards but to the earth as a whole, then place attachment at the global level could positively influence human actions on climate change. In sum, research on global as well as local place attachments can contribute to Hulme’s wider project of revealing ‘*what climate means for people and places and the relationships between people and places over time*’ (2008, 7).

With these issues in mind, this article has two aims: first, to identify and critically review research conducted on the relations between place attachment and climate change in the intervening decades since Feitelson’s paper was published, in order to establish the current state of knowledge; second, to suggest future research pathways based on existing knowledge gaps. The article begins by defining and critically reviewing the concepts of place attachment and place identity, taking an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on scholarship in environmental and social psychology as well as human geography. Second, disparate research on climate change adaptation, mitigation and communication that has referred to place attachment and issues of scale is identified and critically reviewed. In particular, emerging research on the role of spatial aspects of ‘psychological distance’ in influencing public engagement with climate change is reviewed. The article concludes by recommending new directions for research, in particular by capturing attachments to places at multiple scales, with more prominence placed on attachment to the world as a whole: to global place attachment.

2. Place attachment and place identity

Research on people–place relations is burgeoning. Lewicka (2011a) identified a substantial increase over the past three decades, with over 400 articles published in 120 journals across many social science and humanities disciplines, from architecture to human geography to environmental psychology. The conceptual and philosophical basis of place attachment research can be traced back to the concept of place. Although differences exist in how this concept is conceived and researched, common to scholars across a variety of disciplines is the argument that physical locations have ontological importance, being more than a mere backdrop to social phenomena (Gieryn, 2000). ‘*Place is not just a thing in the world . . . place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world*’ (Cresswell, 2003, p. 11).

Research on people–place relations developed from the 1970s, when human geographers used the construct of ‘topophilia’ to refer to the positive emotional bonds people form with certain locations (Tuan, 1974). Approaching place from a phenomenological perspective, geographers expressed concern at an emerging ‘placelessness’ or lack of authenticity in American society (Relph, 1976), based on arguments that place is fundamental to human existence: ‘*There is no place without self; and no self without place*’ (Casey, 2001, p. 406). Contemporary human geographers, influenced by Marxist critiques of essentialist, singular conceptions of the identity of a place (Harvey, 1996) and by Feminist critiques of the idealisation of home (Rose, 1993), have proposed a more relational and political conception of place, emphasising the connections between places in an increasingly networked and globalised world – what has been dubbed a ‘global sense of place’ (Massey, 1995, 2005).

In parallel with this scholarship, environmental psychologists have employed a variety of constructs to understand emotional and existential connections between individuals and the physical environment, with two specific concepts prominent: place attachment (Altman and Low, 1992) and place identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Place attachment has been defined as ‘*positively experienced bonds, sometimes occurring without awareness, that are developed over time from the behavioural, affective and cognitive ties between individuals and/or groups and their socio-physical environment*’ (Brown and Perkins, 1992, p. 284). These emotional bonds are closely intertwined with identity processes (Lewicka, 2011a). Individuals strive to maintain self-esteem, continuity over time, self-efficacy, distinctiveness and a sense of belonging through processes of identification with places (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996) and ensuing place identities encompass both personal and social aspects of the self (Twigger Ross et al., 2003).

Over the past three decades, empirical research in Environmental Psychology has revealed how people form emotional bonds with a variety of places, particularly with the locations where they dwell as well as visited recreation places (Altman and Low, 1992; Farnum et al., 2005). Attachments to locations of dwelling comprise a special form of place, often conceived as ‘home’ (Easthorpe, 2004) and the strength of the attachment bond has been empirically shown to associate with length of dwelling, property ownership, high perceived neighbourhood cohesion, low perceived incivilities (Brown et al., 2003) and forms of action, including participation in community planning (Manzo and Perkins, 2006) and pro-environmental behaviours (Uzzell et al., 2001; Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Recent research has identified multiple varieties of place–place relations that distinguishes two forms of strong attachment to place (‘active’ vs. ‘traditional’) as well as less researched varieties, including alienation, relativity and placelessness (Lewicka, 2011b). Of relevance to the subject of climate change are notions of disruption to place attachment

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