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Adapting relationships with place: Investigating the evolving place attachment and 'sense of place' of UK higher education students during a period of intense transition

Mark Holton

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Plymouth University, Drake Circus, Plymouth, Devon PL4 8AA, UK

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ABSTRACT

In recent years interest has emerged regarding the geographies of higher education students, particularly in patterns of mobility and dispersion. While anecdotal rhetoric suggests a 'typical student' exists within UK institutions, what resonates is the notion that students are inherently heterogeneous, experiencing University in differing ways and times according to their circumstances and year of study. This paper uses 'walking interviews' conducted with University of Portsmouth students as a method to unpack how 'non-local' students might go about interpreting their sense of place within their term-time location. This methodology was designed specifically to ensure discussions of 'sense of place' remain directly in the context of the city and recognises the adaptive relationships students have with their term-time locations. This is important as there is a tendency within the literature to focus solely on the transition into University, ignoring that students often experience pressures *throughout* their degree pathway. These pressures can be linked to various social and spatial changes, such as insecurities regarding fitting in amongst unfamiliar peer groups or a lack of confidence concerning engagement with academic and non-academic practices, and draws attention to the non-linearity of students' associations with their term-time location.

Introduction

Over a decade ago, in the pages of this journal, Chatterton (1999) outlined how the social behaviours of UK undergraduate students were altering urban landscapes through their exclusive uses of social spaces in their term-time locations. Since then a broad and diverse corpus of literature has emerged regarding the geographies of higher education (HE) students, from student [im]mobility (Duke-Williams, 2009; Holdsworth, 2009b; Christie, 2007; Smith and Sage, 2014) to the impacts of studentification[1] on neighbourhoods (Munro and Livingston, 2011; Sage et al., 2012) and wider urban networks (Smith and Holt, 2007; Smith, 2009; Chatterton, 2010). What cuts across this corpus of literature is a clear message that students are a heterogeneous group who experience their time at University in differing ways. At the point of entry into University, students are often introduced to typically 'adult' behaviours, such as unsupervised night-time socialising, over which they have a great deal of control in *how* and they wish to experience these behaviours and *who with*. As Chow and Healey (2008) suggest, the relationships first year undergraduates begin to establish with[in] their term-time location are often experienced intensely, particularly during the initial terms of the first year. What is less clear however, is how these relationships with[in] University locations may change, and how such changes may also begin to both shape and challenge students' identities, particularly as the heterogeneity of University students may contribute towards [un]successful interactions and experiences during term-time (Read et al., 2003).

To place the UK's HE structure in context, since Chatterton's (1999) study UK student numbers have increased from 1,918,970 in 1999 to 2,496,645 in 2011 (HESA, 2011). As well as significantly enlarged learner numbers there has also been a noticeably increased diversity in the trajectories students take into HE. Students are electing to remain at home during their studies (Holdsworth, 2009b), and seek alternative ways of gaining qualifications through distance learning, degree courses through further education colleges or through on-the-job training schemes, adding more diffuse interpretations of approaching University (Holton and Riley, 2013). Such diversity, through policy initiatives such as widening participation targets, aimed at facilitating greater

E-mail address: Mark.holton@plymouth.ac.uk

[1] Smith (2005) defines studentification as the growing concentrations of students within locations adjacent to Universities, often being accommodated within houses in multiple occupation (HMO).

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opportunities for access to HE for those not previously considered eligible to go to University, have exposed the potential for uneven geographies within HE (Holdsworth, 2009b; Mangan et al., 2010) which, with the introduction of the 'new student'[2] (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003), has encouraged much greater social and geographical diversity within the student body than in previous decades.

Nevertheless, despite this increased diversity there still remains a distinct trend for 'going away' to University, with "being a 'student' [being] emblematic for 'not being from around here'" (Holdsworth, 2009a, p. 227). As Holdsworth (2009b) suggests, student mobility remains a vital process which is responsible for changes to the social fabric and built environment of University towns and cities, such as improvements to housing stock, service provision and infrastructure, which often transcend the student community itself (Universities UK, 2005). As Chatterton and Hollands (2003) point out, this has led to complex forms of commodification within University towns and cities whereby students are increasingly viewed as powerful commodifiers, or 'apprentice gentrifiers' (Smith and Holt, 2007). Chatterton and Hollands refer to this as 'studentland' whereby the 'student pound' draws businesses and services into neighbourhoods which would otherwise not have come. However, as Kenyon (1997) cautions, these may only provide secondary benefits to non-student residents as studentified spaces are ultimately for the benefit of the student in order to assist them with developing their 'University experience'.

In moving these debates forward, while considerable attention has been given to how tertiary students manage their transitions through University, little is understood about how they establish any type of attachment or 'sense of place' within their term-time University location. This is important as students generally expect University spaces to provide comparable safety, security and identity to home (Chow and Healey, 2008) in order to minimise homesickness (Scopelitti and Tiberio, 2010) and prevent withdrawal from studies (Wilcox et al., 2005). However, while Chow and Healey (2008) tackle the complex process of establishing place attachment during the initial period of transition into the first year of study, there is very little indication as to how processes, such as accommodation change or adjustments to social and/or friendship groups might instigate subsequent adaptations to understandings of place as undergraduates make their move from being freshers[3] into subsequent year groups. This is particularly pertinent as positive relationships with place may be fundamental for successful transitions for those who are [temporarily] mobile (Gustafson, 2001). In advancing these notions of student mobility, this paper will incorporate discussions of place attachment and 'sense of place' into debates of the geographies of students using empirical data collected as part of a case study of undergraduate students studying at the University of Portsmouth in the South of England. Using the qualitative responses gained through accompanying these students on walking interviews around the city, this analysis will provide a snapshot of how and why relationships with place may adapt at different points during students' transitions through University.

'Sense of place' in transition

Place attachment or a 'sense of place' is often couched within the context of rootedness whereby close, long-term relationships become reliant on intimate and emotional connections with place (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001; Anderson, 2010). As Pretty et al. (2003) indicate: "location itself is not enough to create a sense of place. It emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place" (p. 274). Hay (1998) suggests that there exists a temporality to this process which is linked to residential status. Those with limited connections with locations (e.g. tourists or transients) will have a weaker sense of place than those with more historical connections. Hay recognises that weak ties exist for people who move through places, yet while it is important to focus upon the deep rooted connections with place, superficial, partial or personal connections can also reveal a burgeoning sense of place for those who may have attachments in other locations. While Hay's model focuses upon the temporality of place as an indicator of the intensity of a sense of place, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) draw identity into this debate, suggesting linkages between place attachment and a positive evaluation of place. This model identifies varying degrees of attachment to place (both positive and negative) which can exist among long-term residents. Likewise, Scannell and Gifford's (2013) multidimensional framework identifies place attachment as a product of the relationship between person, place and process. Common among these conceptualisations is the notion that sense of place is heterogeneous and contains characteristics which denote particularly individualised identifications with place.

Key to the development of this paper is Gustafson's (2001) theorisations of the relationships between place attachment and mobility. Place and mobility have traditionally been described in opposition with one another, with place considered the sedentary equivalent to the more dynamic mobility (Cresswell, 2006). Tuan (1977) argues that the stillness of place is crucial in the development of an attachment to place, essentially suggesting that those who are mobile are less likely to achieve a sense of 'belonging' in the particular place they are temporarily residing. More contemporary readings of place and mobility recognise the dynamism of place and how its adaptive and transformative capabilities may be influential in creating multiple senses of place for those in transition (Butcher, 2010; Holton, 2014). As Gustafson (2001) suggests, place attachment and mobility need not necessarily be considered separate entities but instead may be read as complimentary processes. Those who are mobile may be just as likely to wish to replicate the connections they had with previous locations (being neighbourly or part of the local community, etc.) when they move into a new area. Likewise, place can provide a secure anchor upon which those who are mobile can depend on as they travel back and forth. These linkages of place and mobility have been made most explicitly in discussions of diaspora and transnationalism. As Butcher (2010) stresses, these connections become particularly important for those who are in a state of flux as the stability gained from re-placing home assists in the attachment to a new and unfamiliar location. For example, research by Collins (2010) suggests that international students (in Collins' case South Korean HE students residing in New Zealand) may build upon the legacy of the immigrant areas of cities in order to quickly establish their sense of place, socialising in spaces which connect with their cultural heritage. Hence, it is vital to recognise the relationships between how people make sense of their everyday experiences and where these experiences take place.

In turning attention to the transitions experienced by undergraduate students, Palmer et al. (2009) suggest that the period between home and University constitutes an 'in-between-ness' or 'betwixt space', a fragile and emotional space whereby transitional students are learning to 'become' their future selves. Chow and Healey (2008) contextualise this through an examination of the ways in which first year students begin to establish place attachment as they make the transition from the familial home to University. While their findings may suggest that attachments to people are more important to students than place itself – their par-

[2] Christie (2007) defines the 'new student' as first generation University attendees from working class or minority backgrounds – whose limited knowledge of the inner workings of HE mean they can often experience much greater difficulties in 'fitting in' at University.

[3] 'Fresher' or 'freshman' derives from the British or American term for a first year University student.