



The role of natural environments in developing a sense of belonging: A comparative study of immigrants in the U.S., Poland, the Netherlands and Germany[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of natural environments in the development of a sense of belonging among immigrants in host countries. The data were collected with the use of in-depth interviews with 70 Latino and Chinese immigrants in the U.S., Ukrainian and Vietnamese immigrants in Poland, Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands, and Turkish immigrants in Germany. The findings explore recreation in natural environments in relation to the three cornerstones of belonging: history, place, and people. They show how migrants develop connections to places through building a history or a “web of memories;” discuss how migrants use, perceive, and relate to the places they visit; and examine social relationships that take place in natural environments. The findings of the study are discussed using Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) three-dimensional model of place attachment.

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1. Introduction

Studies have shown that visitation to and interactions in natural environments can contribute to the development of attachment, renegotiation of immigrants’ identities, and social cohesion (Jay and Schraml, 2009; Leikkilä et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2010). At the same time, lack of attachment to local natural environments, particularly coupled with experiences of discrimination, may foster feelings of lack of belonging that might lead to exclusion (Neal and Agyeman, 2006). Peoples’ experiences in natural environments can range from exciting, pleasant, and spiritual to frightening and alienating, and while some can lead to developing ties to nature, others may cause such environments to be disliked and avoided (Erickson et al., 2009). Positive experiences in nature may be particularly important for immigrants who are in the process of learning about the local environment, establishing connections with the host population, and bonding with their host country (Leikkilä et al., 2013). The role of natural environments in developing a sense of belong-

ing is likely to depend on a number of factors and may be shaped by immigrants’ cultural background, place of origin, age at arrival, and the similarity of natural environments in the home and host countries (Gustafson, 2009). Ehrkamp (2005) argued that to better understand immigrants’ integration, their relations with particular places, their everyday encounters with, and responses to dominant discourses on immigrants, and their sense of belonging to their new socio-cultural and environmental setting should be examined. In previous studies, a sense of belonging has been mainly discussed in relation to personal well-being (Dinnie et al., 2013), involvement in community life, and social solidarity (Kaźmierczak, 2013). Because immigrants are important global actors, their perceptions of and interactions with natural environments, and how they are related to the development of a sense of belonging at the destination need to be better understood (Gentin, 2011).

In Europe as well as in the U.S., immigration is on the rise. In 2012, 13% of the U.S. population was foreign-born, originating primarily from Mexico (28.2%) and South and East Asia (25.6%) (PEW, 2013). In the Netherlands, approximately 12% of the population was immigrants, primarily from Turkey and Morocco (PEW, 2013). Even in Poland that has been traditionally and still is a country of emigration, the flow of newcomers has begun to grow, and the role of circular immigrants in the Polish labor market has increased (Drbohlav, 2012). Considering the extent of the refugee crisis sparked by the war in Syria and by the social and political

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instability in Iraq, Afghanistan, and North Africa, the diversity of the European population is likely to grow in the near future.

This exploratory study, which adopted a symbolic interaction approach (Blumer, 1986), aimed to examine the role of natural environments in the development of a sense of belonging among immigrants in host countries. Natural environments were defined broadly as any outdoor area that can be used for recreation, such as an urban park, trail, field, forest preserve or national park. We have selected countries that have been considered “traditional magnets” for immigration (U.S., Germany, and the Netherlands) and, conversely, Poland, which is a new immigrant destination (Arango, 2012). Moreover, immigrants from a variety of countries – Vietnam, Ukraine, Morocco, Turkey, China, and Latin America – have been interviewed. The specific objective of the study was to examine how the use of natural environments for leisure and the growing attachment to natural places fostered by recreation contributed to developing a sense of belonging to the new socio-cultural and environmental setting among immigrants.

2. Sense of belonging

According to Bennett (2014), belonging is a nebulous term that is nevertheless central to the identity and everyday life of people. History, people, and place are the three cornerstones of belonging (Bennett, 2014; after Miller, 2003). Belonging can be articulated in terms of “multiple social relationships stretching between past, present, and future generations and places” (Bennett, 2014, p. 658). A sense of belonging, however, is not only based on social relationships with others (Mellor et al., 2008) but is formed in the course of physical and mental interaction with places that is both attitudinal and cognitive. As Bennett wrote, “belonging is inherent in the daily actions undertaken by people who have inalienable connections to the places they inhabit. (...) But the places do not stand alone: they are implicated in networks of relationships between people, places, and activities through time” (p. 669). Those relationships are formed through repetitive activity, interactions, and visitation, so that “belonging as a way of being-in-the-world is part of a mundane nature of everyday life” (p. 669). Connection to places and social relationships that are a part of it are built over time and often involve individuals “appropriating” public spaces (Friedmann, 2007). The building of “history,” or a web of memories that incorporate those places and relationships, and that stretch to the past (often the childhood) and the future (towards the next generation) is critical to the process of forming an ontological belonging. Since the main focus of our study relates to the role of natural environments in developing a sense of belonging, in the next section we will further examine the relations people have with places by discussing the concept of place attachment.

3. Place attachment

Relationships with a place, one of the cornerstones of belonging, hold a prominent position in the environmental psychology literature. People’s relationship with places, and subjective experience of place in particular, have been examined through the lens of place attachment (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001), place identity (Proshansky et al., 1983), place dependence (Williams et al., 1992), place meaning (Derrien and Stokowski, 2014; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001), and sense of place (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). These concepts have a broad scope, and sometimes their meanings are overlapping in different theoretical models (Gustafson, 2001; Kyle et al., 2005; Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

According to Kyle et al. (2005), the concept of place attachment focuses on people’s bonding with places and involves “an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and

actions” (p. 155). Some researchers (e.g., Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989) have conceptualized place attachment as comprised of two aspects: place identity and place dependence. Place identity refers to individuals’ developing, affirming, and expressing their identity through their relations with a setting (Kyle and Chick, 2007; Kyle et al., 2005). Place dependence focuses more on the functional value of places and refers to places’ ability to facilitate desired experiences among users or evaluation of “how well a setting serves [their] goal achievement given the existing range of alternatives” (Kyle et al., 2005, p. 155).

Scannell and Gifford (2010) described place attachment as a multifaceted concept that consists of three dimensions: person, psychological process, and place (PPP). The *person* dimension focuses on who are the individuals or groups who develop personal connections to a place. Places become meaningful to social actors through their individual experiences, milestones, and personal growth that occur there. *Psychological processes* of place attachment “concern(s) the way that individuals and groups relate to a place, and the nature of the psychological interactions that occur in the environments that are important to them” (Scannell and Gifford, 2010, p. 3). The authors identified three psychological aspects of place attachment: affect (positive emotional connection to and investment in a place), cognition (memories, beliefs, meaning and knowledge associated with a place), and behavior (attachment expressed through actions such as maintaining closeness to a place, e.g., efforts to return). The *place* dimension of place attachment has been divided into social attachment (social ties rooted in a place, feeling of belonging and familiarity with other residents or users, attachment to others with whom an individual interacts in a place) and physical attachment (or “rootedness” that is predicted by the length of stay or physical ownership) (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Places to which people are attached to can range from their homes, streets, and neighborhoods to religious and natural sites, such as lakes, parks, forests, and mountains. These places can often have restorative qualities and provide secure environments for self-reflection and stress release. Overall, according to Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) PPP framework, “place attachment is a bond between an individual or group and a place that can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place, and is manifested through affective, cognitive, and behavioral psychological processes” (p. 5).

In our study, following Pollini (2005, p. 497), we consider the sense of belonging and place attachment as “analytically distinct but empirically co-present”. The notion of place attachment allows us to analyze the immigrants’ relationships with place – natural environments that are central to our research – in finer detail, analytically making it the center of gravity of the text. At the same time, the notion of a sense of belonging allows us not to lose sight of broader historical and societal underpinnings of natural environments’ visitation by immigrants. This particular practice is interlinked with the more general processes whereby immigrants establish new social relations and root their cognition, attitudes, and behavior in their previous biographic and cultural experiences. The analytical distinction is a result of separating various aspects of belonging without neglecting the fact that in practice the use of places usually involves meeting people and forming relations with them as well as forming the images of places and ascribing values to places. Thus, the analytical distinction of place attachment and sense of belonging stems from (1) accentuating relations with place or physical situatedness of a person in the place attachment and (2) the complex interrelation between place, identity, culture and society in the sense of belonging. As researchers have argued, relations to place reflect one’s cultural perspective (Wynveen et al., 2011). Since place attachments form through ancestral connection, past experiences, memories, repeated interaction and social connection within a setting (Wynveen et al., 2011), they are also expected to

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