



# Using a narrative approach to understand place attachments and responses to power line proposals: The importance of life-place trajectories



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## ABSTRACT

Research on people-place relations, incorporating place attachment and place identity, has often adopted a structural approach, overlooking the dynamic nature of these relations over time. More process-oriented research has tended to investigate the impacts of single moments or events, neglecting a broader focus upon people's life course. To address this gap, this study investigated patterns of residential place attachments ('life-place trajectories') and used these to better understand current place relations and responses to change, including disruption to pre-existing place bonds. Narrative interviews ( $n = 25$ ) were conducted in 2013 with residents living in Nailsea, a UK town affected by proposals to construct a high voltage power line. Three notable findings emerged. First, the study indicated five novel lifeplace trajectories characterised by diverse configurations of residential mobility and continuity of settlement type. Second, the study extends our understanding of varieties of relationship with the current residence place, including identifying a novel variety of 'traditional-active attachment'. Third, the study indicates the relevance of the trajectories for understanding responses to place change proposals, including acceptance and opposition. The findings show the value of the narrative interview method for revealing place relations across the life course, informing understanding of people-place relations and infrastructure siting.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on place attachment and related concepts such as place identity and place meanings has burgeoned in recent years across a number of cognate disciplines (Lewicka, 2011). Two basic orientations have been identified in this literature: a structural approach that tends to take place attachment as a given and is primarily interested in understanding its qualities, antecedents and implications, and a process approach that seeks to understand the development of people–place bonds over time (Giuliani, 2003). To date, and particularly within the psychology literature, the 'structural' approach has predominated, using both qualitative and quantitative-based methods to capture the intensity and variety of people-place relations at a specific point in time (Devine-Wright, 2014).

Examples of the 'structural' approach include: (1) Proshansky and colleagues' original formulation of place identity, conceived as a substructure of identity (1983); (2) Scannell and Gifford (2010) conceptual model of place attachment comprising *person*, *process* and *place* dimensions; (3) Hummon (1992) and Lewicka (2011, 2013) typology of varieties of people-place relations, encompassing different forms of attachment (*traditional* attachment, referring to an unselfconscious taken-for-granted bond to the residence place, and *active* attachment, designating a reflective and self-conscious bond) and non-attachment to place (*place alienated*, referring to a dislike of one's residence place, *place relativity*, an ambivalent and conditionally accepting attitude, and *placelessness*, designating an absence of emotional association with place). Whilst insightful, the structural approach has relatively little to say about the dynamics of people-place relations as processes that might change over time, including how patterns of past residential mobility might influence ways of relating to the current residence place, and how these patterns might in turn be associated with responses to future changes to a place.

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A number of studies have put place attachment dynamics centre stage. Theorising in human geography has emphasised the continuous nature of physical changes to place, critiquing attempts to conserve place meanings as a potentially exclusionary form of essentialism (Massey, 2005). Researchers in environmental psychology have explored sudden moments of change that disrupt existing place attachments, for example arising from burglary to the residence place or ecological damage to the local area (Brown & Perkins, 1992). More recently, attempts have been made to understand community objections to large-scale energy infrastructure projects, often dubbed 'NIMBYism' (Not In My Back Yard; Dear, 1992), as a form of place-protective action arising from strong bonds with the affected place (Devine-Wright, 2009).

Literature has also explored changes to people over time, and how these implicate people-place relations (Devine-Wright, 2014; Giuliani, 2003). For example, researchers have examined place attachment formation at different life stages using a structural approach, highlighting sequential stages in the development of a sense of place amongst long-term residents, and the importance of autobiographical insideness in maintaining rootedness in old age (Rowles, 1983; Hay, 1998a,b). Research has also observed the role of residential and work-related mobilities in informing place attachment (e.g. Gustafson, 2001; Taberner, Briones, & Cuadrado, 2010; Vidal, Valera, & Maribel, 2010), including the disruptive impacts of relocation and displacement experienced by military personnel and the homeless (Fullilove, 2014), and place attachment formation amongst relocating individuals striving to maintain continuity across settlement type (e.g. Feldman, 1990, 1996; Fried, 2000; Speller & Twigger-Ross, 2009). The roles of nostalgia (Lewicka, 2014) and solastalgia ('the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory', Albrecht et al., 2007:96) in hindering or facilitating attachment to place(s) have also received some minor attention. Finally, some research has begun to explore similarities between processes of place and interpersonal attachment (Morgan, 2010; Scannell and Gifford, 2014), with an interest primarily in the nature of childhood attachment experiences and their implications for styles of attachment over time (e.g. anxious or avoidant).

Whilst the aforementioned studies foreground dynamics of attachment and detachment to place(s), they tend to do so by studying single moments or, at the most, multiple incidents of change, that preclude analysis of attachment dynamics across the entire life course. As far as we are aware, no study to date has investigated the ways in which people talk about and represent their past residential histories – what we describe as their 'life-place trajectories' – and examined how these might inform understanding of the type of relationship they have with their current residence place, and the implications these may have for responses to proposals to change the residence place. This is the gap addressed by this research.

### 1.1. The role of 'life-place trajectories' in understanding responses to place change

Disruption to place attachment refers to the negative impact that sudden ecological or human-induced change can have upon pre-existing place attachment bonds and identities (Fried, 1963, 2000; Ingham & Finch, 2004). Brown and Perkins (1992) proposed a three-stage model of disruption (pre-disruption, disruption and post-disruption), outlining a process leading to the formation of new bonds following events such as household burglary or forced relocation. Elsewhere, studies adopting Identity Process Theory (Speller & Twigger-Ross, 2009; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000), Social Identity Theory (Bonaiuto, Breakwell, & Cano, 1996;

Carrus, Bonaiuto, & Bonnes et al., 2005), and Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Stedman, 2002), have investigated ways in which place change may threaten place-based identities. Although highly instructive, this literature is limited by implying that disruption is the result of an actual, rather than a proposed, physical change to a place (Devine-Wright, 2009), and by overlooking the ways that change may be seen as enhancing as well as negative or 'disruptive' in nature (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Devine-Wright, 2011a).

A related and emerging body of literature has focused upon community responses to proposals for siting energy infrastructure, understanding these as forms of place change that impact upon existing people-place bonds. The construction of new high voltage power lines, for example in the UK (Jay, 2005), Sweden (Soini, Pouta, Salmiovirta, Uusitalo, & Kivinen, 2011) Germany (Zoellner et al., 2008) and Switzerland (Lienert, Suetterlin, & Siegrist, 2015), has proven highly controversial, resulting in strong community opposition, planning delays and financial cost for developers. Local objectors have often been cast pejoratively using the NIMBY concept, labelled as selfish, ignorant and irrational (e.g. Burningham et al., 2006; Cotton & Devine-Wright, 2011). Despite its prominence, the NIMBY concept has been widely criticised for overlooking the varied motivations leading to opposition and for discounting the subjective emotional and symbolic associations people form with places (Devine-Wright, 2011c, 2009; Ellis, Barry, & Robinson, 2007; Wolsink, 2000).

In response to these critiques, Devine-Wright (2009) posited a place-based approach, highlighting the roles of place attachment and place-related symbolic meanings in shaping individual and collective responses to energy infrastructure proposals. NIMBY type opposition is here recast as 'place-protective action' with locally affected communities theorised to resist siting proposals arising from a sense of threat to existing place relations. To date, empirical studies have typically used surveys to quantitatively examine associations between intensity or varieties of place attachment and levels of social acceptance toward various large-scale infrastructure proposals, including hydropower plants, wind farms, tidal devices and power lines (Vorkinn & Riese, 2001; Devine-Wright, 2011a, 2011b, 2013). More recently, Veelen and Hagggett (in press) used a qualitative method to show how different types of place attachment and related place meanings can act as both a driver of support and a motivator of opposition toward small-scale, community-led energy projects.

Given that some studies have found strong place attachment to be associated with project opposition (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001), it might be assumed more generally that individuals with stronger place attachment are more likely to experience place disruption in contexts of change and to oppose energy projects. However, studies have shown this conclusion to be simplistic. First, type of place attachment has been shown to be important. A study conducted in the same town as the present research found that only the 'active' attachment variety, not 'traditional' place attachment, emerged as a significant predictor of objections to a power line proposal, suggesting that strong place bonds *per se* are not sufficient to explain objections to place change (Devine-Wright, 2013). Second, symbolic meanings are also important, in particular the degree of congruence or 'fit' between place and infrastructure-based meanings or representations, with lack of congruence shown to result in objection and negative feelings, and congruence leading to acceptance and support (Anderson, 2013; Batel et al., 2015; Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; McLachlan, 2009; Venables, Pidgeon, Parkhill, Henwood, & Simons, 2012). In assessing this degree of 'fit', studies have adopted a constructionist epistemology, interpreting place and technology meanings as social constructions that are plural, often contested,

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