



Exploring the influence of perceived urban change on residents' place attachment



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ABSTRACT

Significant changes in urban environments pose challenges for residents' well-being and individuals' affective bonds to places. Place attachment has been identified as an essential indicator for these person–place bonds. Surprisingly, place attachment has rarely been studied in its response to the perception of change. This study uses data of $N = 746$ residents from a postal survey to explore the influence of perceived changes in the urban environment on residents' place attachments in Zurich, Switzerland.

The study found significant relations between urban change and place attachment. When change in the urban environment was perceived as an attractive upgrade and as (still) familiar, it was positively associated with place attachment. Despite its limitations (e.g., the cross-sectional design), the study indicates that urban design, at least indirectly, can influence residents' relatedness to places. We suggest that dynamic aspects of environmental change need to be articulated more explicitly in place attachment theory.

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1. Introduction

In a rapidly urbanizing world with global mobility, the individual's experience and affective bonds with places have recently spurred renewed interest, as reflected in place attachment research (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014; Raymond, Brown, & Weber, 2010; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place attachment affects the individual's well-being and is influenced by a variety of predictors from three main dimensions: the place characteristics, the personal characteristics, and the psychological processes of perceiving and experiencing place (Lewicka, 2011b; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Surprisingly, place attachment, as a spatially related concept, has rarely been studied in terms of testing the influence of variation in place characteristics over time. There are few and inconsistent findings on the perception of place change and its impact on people's affective place bonds (Devine-Wright, 2014). Devine–Wright pointed to the “primary importance in understanding the impacts of such changes” (2014, p. 168), yet the current understanding of

the ways environmental changes influence place attachment “remains in its infancy” (2014, p. 165). For many years, personal characteristics received the most attention in place attachment research (Hernandez, Hidalgo, & Ruiz, 2014; Lewicka, 2011b).

Considering significant changes in places and their effects on residents' place attachment are of particular interest during times of rapid urban growth. Rapid urbanization has been identified as an accelerator of innovation and economic growth and an opportunity for efficient infrastructure usage. At the same time, it also poses severe challenges through unwanted ecological, socio-economic, and health impacts (Bettencourt & West, 2010). While these impacts have been studied extensively to date and are readily quantified and monitored, the effects of urbanization on social processes and human interaction with the urban environment are less tangible (Slemp et al., 2012).

Consequently, this study explores the influence of perceived urban changes (PUC) on residents' place attachments observed in a region in Switzerland. The region is rapidly growing in population, jobs, and urban infrastructure. The urban densification and the intense inflow of new residential groups are part of a currently contested city development. This development is challenging the local identity and community coherence. It might also be a

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significant stressor for the person–environment bonds. As these bonds can affect the behavioral intentions of residents, for example, toward accepting or opposing urban planning interventions, this study has implications for monitoring and communication in urban management.

1.1. Theoretical considerations on place attachment

The concept of place attachment has been defined by different scientific disciplines, such as environmental psychology, human geography, and sociology, though a common understanding is missing (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Giuliani referred to place attachment as “the section of human experience represented by affect, which people experience, in various ways and varying awareness, with reference to places in which they are born, live and act; also in the relation to the other persons who live and operate in the same places” (2003, p. 137). One tentative description stems from Low and Altman’s seminal work that referred to place attachment as “an integrating concept that emphasizes affective relations to environmental settings” (1992, p. 7); or, in short: place attachment is the degree of meaning given to specific environments. However, Williams (2014) recently criticized the “often blurry distinction between place as a locus of attachment and place as a center of meaning” (p. 89). Both aspects of the person–place relationship as a whole, attachment and meaning, develop over time with experiences occurring in places and result in emotional bonds that people have with places (Low & Altman, 1992). Likewise, place attachment and place identity remain two constructs with partly overlapping yet diverging definitions. Place identity was defined as the “part of people’s personal identity which is based on or built upon the physical and symbolic features of the places in which people live” (Bonaiuto, Carrus, Martorella, & Bonnes, 2002, p. 636). Environmental transformations, as in rapidly growing urban environments, are able to affect people’s identity, which in turn, together with “a perceived loss of control over land can produce strong place attachment in specific groups” (p. 636).

Place attachment is treated either as a uni-dimensional concept (Devine-Wright, 2011; Fornara, Bonaiuto, & Bonnes, 2010), related to other discrete concepts such as place identity at the same level (Hernandez et al., 2014), or regarded as consisting of multiple dimensions. For instance, Lewicka (2011a) proposed subtypes of place attachment, named place inherited, place discovered, place relativity, alienation, and placelessness, whereas Williams and Vaske (2003) considered place attachment as composed of the two dimensions of place dependence and place identity. Additionally, scholars consider place attachment as being part of an overarching, superordinate concept labeled with sense of place (Hernandez et al., 2014). Sense of place then builds on the dimensions of place identity (or identification), place dependence, and place attachment (e.g. Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006). In fact, Manzo and Devine–Wright only recently pointed to the insufficient development of the theory (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014). Neither the developmental processes of human–place bonds, nor the concept and influence of place are coherently defined among scholars.

Against this background of terminological and conceptual heterogeneity this study builds on the conceptual understanding presented in the tripartite model by Scannell and Gifford (2010). It defines the three constituting dimensions for place attachment: the place characteristics, the personal characteristics, and the psychological processes of perceiving and experiencing place. However, it is not a theoretical process model of how place attachment develops; the scheme helps distinguish the influencing factors and involved processes. The process dimension includes affective,

cognitive, and behavioral components. These procedural sub-dimensions imply a temporal perspective. However, the model does not explicitly reflect the dynamic nature of place attachment processes. Hence, this study further investigates the interaction of place characteristics (the place dimension) with the person dimension by empirically testing the place changes over time in their relation with place attachment.

1.2. Empirical findings on place attachment phenomena in changing environments

Place attachment is a key concept for capturing affective person–place bonds. The aforementioned conceptual heterogeneity is reflected in the operationalization of the concepts. Diverse measurement procedures offer “different foci on behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs even while using the same definition of place attachment” (Hernandez et al., 2014, p. 130). Despite these prevalent measurement challenges, empirical research found evidence for a variety of predicting factors of place attachment.

An extensive overview on the state of research is provided in Lewicka’s seminal review study (Lewicka, 2011b), which includes the antecedents and consequences of place attachment. Among the personal characteristics, the length of residency (Bonaiuto, Aiello, Perugini, Bonnes, & Ercolani, 1999; Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003) was mostly positively correlated with people’s place attachments, whereas findings were inconsistent on the roles of other socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, and educational level (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Lewicka, 2005). This suggests that the influences of these factors on place attachment are most likely mediated or moderated by other factors (Lewicka, 2011b). Among social predictors studied to date, the strength of community ties has consistently shown a positive relation with people’s attachments (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Lewicka, 2005). Brown and colleagues (2003) and Lewicka (2010) provided insights into the influence of housing and neighborhood variables and reported home ownership as a positive predictor. Studies testing specific housing characteristics, such as living in cooperative housing¹ are non-existent. Yet, cooperative housing is a specific type of housing tenure established in many countries, including Sweden, the UK, Canada, and the US (Clapham, 2012). Cooperative housing offers a unique context for resident involvement assumed to have a positive effect on the social cohesion within the housing community and beyond.

1.3. Lack of research on how place changes influence individual attachment

Droseltis and Vignoles (2010) pointed out the existing over-emphasis on the social dimension of place attachment, at the expense of studying the influence of place characteristics and their variation over time. Only a few previous studies have covered the impacts of place changes on place attachment. In particular, the positive effects of changing environments on people’s place attachments are largely neglected in the literature. However, Devine-Wright (2009) suggested that place attachment

¹ Despite significant differences among cooperative housing types, it is ultimately a collective form of tenure to deal with management and maintenance of the housing infrastructure. Involvement varies between direct work (such as helping to clear up the area) and decision-making roles, such as deciding on development strategies. Many housing cooperatives in Switzerland offer common infrastructure that allows neighborhood ties to evolve (e.g., by providing common meeting rooms and initiating public activities in the neighborhood). In Switzerland, housing cooperatives own 145,000 housing units, which equals about 5.1% of the overall housing stock in the country (Wohnbaugenossenschaften Schweiz, 2013).

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