Producing place: A neo-Schutzian perspective on the 'psychology of place'

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Abstract

In this paper, we focus on the question of the nature of place and how orderliness arises in places. The development of the psychology of place is briefly reviewed emphasizing the contribution of a phenomenological perspective. This review allows us to identify a central problem in the development of ideas of place in environmental psychology, namely the problem of sociality. The sociality problem is that current conceptualizations of place do not explain how places become known and understood intersubjectively. Current conceptualizations emphasize individual understanding without explaining how places can become known collectively. We propose a resolution to this problem by drawing upon a strand of phenomenology which has not usually been foregrounded in psychology—the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. Schutz's programme for social science and in particular how he addressed the problem of intersubjective understanding is outlined. Schutz's perspective emphasizes the 'We-relationship' and its mutual co-construction through interaction and in particular language use; places as 'typifications' form an integral part of this co-construction. Drawing on work undertaken in discursive psychology, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology we then illustrate how this programme could be implemented in environmental psychology with a particular focus on how collective understandings of place can arise and how the genesis of this collective understanding can be empirically studied.
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1. Introduction

A principal focus in environmental psychology has been and continues to be on people's everyday interactions with their physical environment, a focus which can be characterized as the study of ordinary behaviour in ordinary settings. An important outcome of this focus has been the emergence of place as a concept for capturing people's relationships with the physical environment in which they act (Canter, 1977, 1986; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000, 2004). One of the main functions of this concept has been to account for the orderliness of people's interaction with the physical environment. For example, in their account of 'People in places', Stokols and Shumaker (1981) argue that

settings are "… a particular place in which specific individuals share recurring patterns of activity and experience" (p. 442). As we describe briefly below, both Barker and Ittelson, who have each made major contributions to the founding of the discipline of environmental psychology, have also been concerned, in different ways, with the nature and location of orderliness.

Though orderliness in the terms we have expressed it above, has not been a central conceptual and empirical issue in environmental psychology, our argument is that it has formed one of the major underlying assumptions in the development of the concept of place and as such requires foregrounding and more detailed explication. By opening up this question of how orderliness arises in person–environment interactions, our aim is to draw attention to how people construct a meaningful context for their actions. This focus puts at the centre of analysis the processes of

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meaning-making where such meaning is jointly accomplished and contested by people in interaction with one another. This focus also draws attention to the normative features of place and how these normative features are oriented to and used as a basis for understanding and accounting for actions in locations.

The question of how orderliness arises has not been adequately addressed in environmental psychology, partly due to the discipline's emphasis on individual psychological functioning. Orderliness can only arise through a collective or intersubjective understanding of place, and it is this 'sociality' problem which needs to be re-examined with a view to developing a more adequate notion of place. In order to develop a position from which to understand how an intersubjective understanding of place can arise, we follow several steps. We briefly review the development of the psychology of place emphasizing the contribution which a phenomenological perspective has made to this area. We then argue for the value of an alternative phenomenological perspective derived from Alfred Schutz's phenomenological sociology. This perspective explicitly attempts to resolve the 'sociality' problem by developing an account of intersubjectivity based upon the dynamics of the 'We-relationship'. We argue that this perspective has a number of implications for understanding place and thereby opens up a range of unique and challenging directions for place research. These directions are illustrated by reference to two broad areas of current research. The first focuses on the discursive construction of places, noting in particular research which has examined the practices involved in formulating places in everyday talk. Close examination of the discursive construction of place shows how place descriptions and formulations are instrumental in establishing situated meanings of place and are aligned with the unfolding projects of the participants to the encounter. The second direction focuses on examining the detailed, moment-to-moment accomplishment of place through talk, gesture, gaze and other non-verbal devices, and the use of artefacts in the setting. This research is contrasted with previous research in environmental psychology which has taken a systemic ethnographic orientation. In both cases, we argue that undertaking a detailed analysis of the accomplishment of place provides a way of understanding the genesis of collective meanings and orientations to places as well as how the meanings of place are contested in the course of people's everyday encounters with one another.

2. Perspectives on orderliness

In environmental psychology, there have been broadly two contrasting ways in which orderliness has been explained. On the one hand, an ecological strand can be identified represented, for example, by the work of Roger Barker and his colleagues (Barker, 1968; Barker & Associates, 1978; Barker, 1983; also see Kaminski, 1983; Scott, 2005). On the other, there is a cognitivist strand

initiated by the founders of environmental psychology and which continues as the dominant paradigm in environmental psychology to this day (Ittelson, Proshansky, Rivlin, & Winkel, 1974; Rivlin, 2000).

For Barker and his associates, the observed orderliness of people's interaction with the physical milieu and others present arises in the ecological environment through the dynamics and structuring of 'behavior settings'. Behaviour settings are fundamental units of the ecological environment where "… the pattern of activity within each setting is stable and characteristic … [and] … the behavior of persons who move between behavior settings conforms to the patterns prevailing in the setting they currently inhabit …" (Barker & associates, 1978, p. 194). Thus: "… a behavior setting is a self-governing entity with homeostatic control mechanisms that enforce, within limits, conformity of its diverse components to its standing pattern and level of functioning in the presence of internal and external disturbances" (Barker & Associates, 1978, p. 196). The behavior setting thus has a program designed to fulfil certain outcomes (e.g. a commercial transaction). Individuals are constrained and coerced into fulfilling the program of the setting by engaging in 'standing patterns of behavior' which are 'synomorphic' (i.e. interdependent) with the setting's particular physical components.

In contrast Ittelson et al. (1974) have critiqued this position as overly determinist and emphasized that orderliness is a normative matter, in so far as people are socialized to behave appropriately in relation to relevant physical settings (p. 90). An understanding of how to behave appropriately arises through the cognitive processes of the individual. They aver that the physical environment is 'typically neutral' (p. 96) and only comes into self-conscious awareness when it deviates from an adaptation level, at which point six interrelated cognitive processes occur: affect, orientation, categorization, systemization, manipulation and encoding. Through these processes, individuals form stable and enduring representations of their environment which enable them to operate in a predictable and orderly manner in their everyday world. As they say:

> The single human psychological process most critical for man/ environment interaction, and one that underlies all the response characteristics that we have described is that of cognition. It is this intellectual function and the perceptual process with which it is linked that enable us to transform the chaotic outer world apprehended by our senses into a coherent inner world that we can manage. (Ittelson et al., 1974, p. 98).

This idea of the orderliness of the everyday world, as being primarily dependent upon individual internal representations of that world, was also strongly advocated by Canter (1977) in his seminal work, *The Psychology of Place*. These two approaches to understanding orderliness have also adopted contrasting methodologies. Barker's ecological approach has relied upon detailed observation