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REVISED ENTRY FOR ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

TITLE: PLACE

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Introduction

Place is a problematic concept for psychologists because it inevitably raises the question of the connection between place and person, which, of course, is not fixed. An exploration of the significance of (any) place must consider issues raised by interpretation and mobility. Although the study of place has conventionally been the concern of environmental and cognitive psychology, critical psychologists are likely to work within a different paradigm to consider the complex, unstable, reflexive and unfolding nature of relationships to place which are shaped but never wholly determined by collective understandings and identifications.

Keywords

Place, place-identity, mobility, born and bred narrative

Definition

Place most commonly refers to the physical environment in which the psychological subject is located. However, any specification of 'place' is complicated by the multiple terms in which it may be defined. Even in supposedly external or objective terms, a location is open to description in terms of different scales and component features (e.g. room, building, street etc; the décor, furniture, condition of the room, people present etc). Then there are the different possible statuses of any place, including, for example, those given by its naming, official designation (e.g. as the territory of a particular nation-state) and uses. It is therefore necessary to consider the salience of various aspects of place which tends to shift the focus from 'place' to the connection between place and person, and hence to people's relationships to place.

Traditional debates

Place may be reduced to elements or dimensions which supposedly impact on the psychological subject, for example, as part of a process of attachment and the formation of an identity. This kind of modelling is strongly associated with environmental psychology, for example, in the work of Canter (1977), Breakwell (e.g. Breakwell, 1986) and Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (e.g. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). It must still take

account of the problem that the perception or experience of place is selective and almost inevitably subjective, in the sense of being shaped by personal experience and associations.

Relationships to place are often discussed in terms of identity (see entry). The concept of place-identity (sometimes but not always hyphenated) was originally proposed by Proshansky et al (1983/1995). Working in a cognitive tradition, they suggested that the self is 'a stable, unified and integrated system' (p.88) and that place-identity is a 'sub-structure' of this system. They define place-identity as made up of a person's 'cognitions' of her or his current and former, and possible future, physical environments. In their words, 'These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behaviour and experience' (p.89). The essential features of this theory, then, are its emphasis on mental phenomena (the cognitions) which function to maintain a stable system, adjusting for example to accommodate changes in the physical world or in other parts of the system.

The narrative psychologist, Theodore R. Sarbin (Sarbin, 2005), proposed a re-formulation of the concept of place-identity, arguing that there needed to be some 'organizing principle' for how the cognitions were brought together. He suggested that 'narrative emplotment' could provide such a principle. The 'functional and symbolic features of particular places', (p.2) including their 'historical and symbolic qualities' could contribute to life stories and identities linked to place.

These two conceptions of place-identity are similar in that they assume the possibility of a stable and integrated whole, that is, the system of the self or the structured narrative emplotment. Change and disruption may occur but the tendency is for the integrity of the self or emplotment to be restored. There is also an assumption that this functioning is largely outside awareness. The two conceptions can be criticised for the assumptions of stability and closure (associated with a structural rather than a poststructuralist ontology), and for their failure to accommodate sufficiently people's reflexive awareness of place,

linked for example to decisions about mobility. They have also been criticised for giving insufficient attention to collective meanings.

Critical debates

Any attempt to define place as if objectively viewed, for example in terms of the physical features of an environment, raises some of the issues which the concept presents for critical psychologists. Can the influence of a place be separated from an individual's selective perceptions, unique life practices and the associations the place carries for her or him, and can these in turn be considered separately to collective understandings, including the political meanings attached to places? An exploration of associations, meanings and practices shifts the focus of study from the place itself to <u>relationships</u> to place. These inevitably differ because of the variety of functions, and economic and legal statuses, which the 'same' place can have for different people.

Durrheim and Dixon (2005) challenge the concept of place-identity, outlined above, for its claims to universality, a paradigmatic feature of cognitive psychology. Their interest is in post-apartheid South African society and they suggest that an understanding of dislocation in relation to place in South Africa must take account of specificities of the sociohistoric context and its politics, including collective, intergroup identifications with place which, they suggest, place-identity cannot adequately account for. They also criticise the mechanistic aspect of cognitive explanations (another paradigmatic feature), suggesting that the discontinuity involved in dislocation is 'achieved rather than simply aroused' (p.204). These criticisms point to the need for an account of place identification as reflexive and active.

The relevance of identities of place, including national or regional identities, is further complicated by mobility. For example, Taylor (2010) discusses the issue that the importance of a place of residence derives from a narrative of 'successive generations living in the same place, sharing a common "born and bred" identity derived from blood and tradition' (pp. 11-12). The importance of the narrative is not as a description, since many or most people's lives do not conform to it, but as a discursive or cultural resource

for the construction of relationships to place. Taylor employs a narrative-discursive approach, based in critical discursive psychology, which explores active identity work in relation to place, involving choice and negotiation. She emphasises the selective and personal but also constrained relationships to places of residence constructed by women.

Collective identifications are resources for such identity work but do not ultimately determine them: people's relationships to the same place vary within the limits given by such identifications. Indeed, one further issue of the definition of place is that it is necessarily fluid and variable. As already noted, both named and unnamed places admit of multiple descriptions which incorporate different features, including even their extent and boundaries. In addition, places can be modified and people can change their relationships to place by moving, in the moment and longer-term, for example, through changes of residence and migration.

The processes through which dominant versions and definitions are established and reinforced have been discussed, for example, by Michael Billig (1995) in relation to national places. Contests around them relate to claims of belonging associated with nationality, ethnicity and also home, and to conflicting and disputed uses of the same places. Contests are linked to the racialised, gendered and classed meanings attached to places, whether specific (like named places) or generic (the nation; home). For critical psychologists, place is therefore a pertinent aspect of many larger topics and issues rather than a topic in itself.

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Online resources

List of key words

born and bred narrative

place

place-identity

mobility

List of names

Michael Billig

Glynis Breakwell

David Canter

John Dixon

Kevin Durrheim

Proshansky et al

Theodore R. Sarbin

Stephanie Taylor

Clare Twigger-Ross

David Uzzell