

Wanted: 'Place'
To fill vacancy in roomy, well appointed 'space' within youth sociology. Available immediately

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Abstract

Leading scholars suggest that contemporary social processes and pressures have diminished the importance of 'place'. In the wake of the powerful discourses around globalisation, place has been largely relegated to the 'spatially oriented' fields. This paper argues that this construct remains a valuable, though under exploited tool for understanding. It is proposed that the field of youth sociology is well positioned to lead a resurgence in a more overtly, heterogenous and multi dimensional understanding of place.

Introduction

Currently, within sociology, there exists something of a fundamental non-debate. Whilst some suggest that there has been an 'explosion of empirical research on the spatial aspects of social life' (Gotham 2003: 723; see also Labao and Saenz 2002; Gieryn 2000; Freidland and Boden 1994) and we have seen the publication within human geography of *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (Hubbard et al. 2004), recent years have also given rise to the argument that 'place' has lost its impact in late modern or post-modern worlds (Gieryn 2000). It is proposed that contemporary social processes and pressures have reduced or altered place to such an extent that its importance as a construct of interest has diminished. Simply, it is reasoned that 'modern society, in contrast to traditional societies, is characterised by mobility and that places are losing meaning as a framework for people's lives and as a basis for the formation of identity' (Wilborg 2004: 416).

Advocates of a less foreboding perspective (Young (2001: 682) refers to them as 'place preservationists') contend that it is the very social processes that 'shrink distance and the barriers of physical space¹' which in fact necessitate an active interest in place

(Tickamyer 2000: 811). In fields described as 'spatially oriented' (Lobao and Saenz 2002), such as demography, rural, urban and community sociology, place has remained a foundational focus. Rather than seeking abandonment of the concept, recent works in these fields have called for a more considered engagement, particularly in relation to the stratification of inequality (Gotham 2003; Lobao and Saenz 2002; Tickamyer 2000) and within the discipline of sociology more generally (Gieryn 2000).

In this paper I argue for a greater emphasis on place within contemporary sociological studies. I contend that despite the prominence of the global in our writings, place remains as relevant and valuable a variable as the others that we rely upon to make meanings of our social worlds. Furthermore, a case is made for a more nuanced use of the concept within sociology; the field of youth research identified as being well positioned to lead this endeavour.

Shifting foundations and social-scapes

Contemporary popular and academic discourses are replete with description of unmitigated change; of globalisation. That we might bear witness to a fundamental evolution, to the emergence of a new societal formation, speaks to the most disinterested social observer. We appear increasingly enthralled by the emancipatory and irreparable potentialities of the global.

Whilst Phil Hubbard and colleagues (2004) deal with some 50 'Key Thinkers', the scholars cited most often in relation to the dismantling or reshaping of place include Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and more recently George Ritzer. In his earlier works Bauman points to investments in theorising around nation (place) as 'vain' and 'time-wasting' (Bauman 1992: 678). Beck (1992) refers to risk, danger, treat and hazard as features under globalisation that do not respect the boundaries of place. He refers to the growing conflict between the 'cosmopolitan' and the 'nation-state', contending that in the headlights of globalisation, perspectives rooted in 'soil', particularly in nation-states, 'inevitably [lose] contact with reality' (Beck 2000: 80): in 'second modernity...the assumed congruence of state and society is broken down and

suspended: economic and social ways of acting, working and living no longer take place within the container of the state' (Beck 2000: 87-88). For Giddens, there has been a global uptake of interest in the processes and impacts of globalisation: 'no one who wants to understand our prospects at century's end can ignore it' (2002: 7). Conceiving of this 'revolutionary' process as rooted in political, technical, cultural and economic domains, Giddens asserts that developments in communication technologies and systems have effected a fundamental contraction in the global and as such have 'alter[ed] the very texture of our lives' (2002: 11). Finally, Ritzer (2000), with the popularly acclaimed McDonaldisation, speaks to the subjugation of uniqueness and local variation through the 'globalisation of nothing'. Each of these perspectives shares the assumption that places are losing their 'distinctiveness', their 'reality' and their 'significance' (Gieryn 2000: 463).

We must of course read these perspectives with caution. Simply branding these theorists 'anti-place' (or 'place dissolutionists' to mirror Young's (2001) language), belies the complexity of their positions. In more recent times Bauman has dealt explicitly with notions of nation-state; with place. He has spoken to differential between the 'first world' and 'second world' in their experiences of globalisation/glocalisation (Bauman 1998) and he has described the ways in which the events of September 11 have necessitated a reorganizing of ideas around place (Bauman 2002). Whilst speaking to contraction through globalisation, Giddens (2002) also offers discussion as to the 'revival of local cultural identities' in the wake of these processes. As such, we can see that seeking to capture place within the contemporary climate is richly complex, though integral, task.

Concern with this regard lies in the suggestion that, at best, a 'loss of place' through globalisation reduces the construct to shapelessness and meaninglessness or simply a repository: a 'static...container or backdrop in which action takes place' (Gotham 2003: 724). On this point it has been posited that a greater appreciation for spatiality would establish sociology as a discipline which goes beyond 'explanations that are...just a restatement of social action taking place in space' (Gotham 2003: 733). That is, neglecting place is a fundamental loss, not only of context, but of content.

Seeking to define ‘place’

Reviewing the work of several iconic figures, amongst them Marx and Engles, Durkheim, Simmel, Parsons and Goffman, Kevin Gotham (2003) illustrates a longstanding willingness amongst ‘sociologists’ to engage with spatiality (see Hubbard et al. 2004, for a broader inventory and perspective of this field). Despite what appears to be a significant disciplinary stake in such ideas, exemplified by a lengthy history of scholarship in relation to place, spatial works continue to be criticised for a lack of theoretical rigor. Gotham (2003) and others contend that there is considerable scope for theoretical advancement, particularly in terms of the relationships between place and social action. Indeed, it has been suggested that ‘sociology can be faulted less for its failure to recognise spatiality...than for its failure to theorize space explicitly, to analyse it systematically, and to weave it into the fabric of other social processes’ (Tickamyer 2000: 808). That repeated calls for greater discourse across discipline’s have yet to be realised is a notable point within this body of criticism (Tickamyer 2000).

Such concerns go some way to explaining the disciplines general tentativeness about engaging with spatiality. Drawing on the work of Linda Lobao, Dani Stehlik (2001: 34) reports that sociologists do not ‘do’ place well and, as such, must look to other fields for direction:

The lack of theoretical understanding of ‘space’ within mainstream sociology means that it is ‘missing’ within the development of sociological research inquiry. Thus, when teaching research methods we focus on the familiar key variables – inevitably age, class, race and gender – but rarely, if ever, do we *identify space as a variable for analysis*. Instead we background it delete it or take it for granted. While we may be more comfortable with notions of ‘place’, this also rarely appears as a research variable...sociologists can not look to their own discipline...we must look elsewhere [emphasis in original]

We might for example look to the work of philosopher Edward Casey (1993; 1997; 2001) whose work has been welcomed in geographical circles (Entrikin 2001; Young 2001) or to the work of geographers such as Doreen Massey (1994) for direction.

Giddens (1994: xiii) writes of his lack of surprise at sociology's 'groping' in relation to 'a satisfactory means of conceptually encompassing this new [global] universe of social activity' (one that for Giddens lies at the intersection of space and time). Whilst these contemporary processes present challenges to theory, when viewed alongside other variables, place is curiously singled out for its lack of a singularly defined and defensible theoretical tradition.

Thomas Gieryn (2000) offers an accessible and meaningful contribution to this field, conceiving of place as comprising 'three necessary and sufficient features': (1) geographic location, (2) material form and (3) investment with meaning and value. 'Geographic location' is reference to 'a unique spot in the universe' and may include a town, a nation, a continent or simply 'your favorite armchair' (464). 'Material form' encapsulates the physical, the 'compilation of things or objects at some particular spot in the universe' (465). Finally, places feature an 'investment with meaning and value': they are 'interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood and imagined' (465). This definition positions place as not simply a bounded form on a map, but speaks to place as a concept that can be engaged with across the spectrum of theoretical perspectives.

'Contested, fluid and uncertain', the 'rules' and 'boundaries' of place can best be conceived as 'both social and spatial' (McDowell 1999: 4). As such, the local is more than geography, more than something 'out there'; it is both 'social construction that shapes social action and guides behaviour' (Gotham 2003: 723). Places 'create and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities' they 'enable and promote some practices over others' (Tickamyer 2000: 806). Places 'constitute part of the opportunity structure' (Tickamyer 2000: 806-7) and are inherent in the ways that we conceive of the world: 'it is not possible to think about community, neighbourhood, environment, household, work, school, state, or labour markets, to name a few, without at least implicitly assuming their spatial character' (Tickamyer 2000: 807).

Whilst referring specifically to community, an excerpt from Kevin McDonald's (1999) work encapsulates the very sentiments that similarly make place such an integral variable. If we were to substitute 'place' for 'community' in the following (acknowledging that

this is *not* McDonald's stated position), we are presented with an argument that makes it difficult to disregard the local:

Communities are social worlds that we grow up in, worlds that allow us to call ourselves "us"...they have cultures – systems of meaning that allow us to make sense of the world – which sustain the shared or social definitions of right and wrong that sociologists call norms...communities also have borders, an affirmation of "us" always involving the construction of "them". (McDonald 1999: 23, 24)

'Place' and 'community' are not interchangeable. However, if understood as engendering similar power and influence, place becomes a central concern to sociologists who work with and for young people.

Searching for the place of 'place' in young people's worlds

The irrelevance of place in a globalised world is a seductive argument. Even a cursory glance, however, at the United Nations (2005) World Youth Report reveals profound disjunctures in the status of young people that can be meaningfully illuminated with reference to place. Intuitively, we know that some of the issues raised in this report are of greater concern for populations in some places and less so in others.

We know, for instance, that when we explore education (one of the priority areas identified in the UN report) there are fundamental reasons for considering the places in which young people reside and as such we have seen the emergence of a wealth of literature exploring rural education and education in areas categorised as disadvantaged. It is not my contention, nor is it that of those who research in these domains, that educational experience and opportunity can be explained in terms of place alone. We are aware that educational experience and opportunity is impacted by inequality and challenge raised through variables including ethnicity, class and gender. It can, and should, be argued however, that educational issues can more meaningfully be understood when explored within the places in which young people are located and in which they construct themselves and their lives.

In relatively recent times Chris Philo (1992) drew attention to the 'neglected rural geographies' of young people residing in rural areas. This was a call to make more visible the voices of the young in a field invested in place: rural sociology. In contrast, this paper is a call to action for a more nuanced and sensitive engagement with place within the youth field. It is a call to recognition of the 'neglected geographies' of all youth.

Beyond simply adding categorical labels to our description of sample, we should seek greater meaning through explorations of place. That is, whilst we are increasingly coming to understand rurality and rural experience as complex and multiple (Mathews et al. 2000) so too should we see these themes emerge in the youth research that is currently without place. That we, by default, presume these places to be urban, because all others are through convention so labelled, is unacceptable.

Conclusions

Whilst some fields are arguably constrained by their focus, research with 'young people' allows us to engage with the full spectrum of social issues/problems. Accordingly, we are well positioned to lead the discipline in a more overtly, heterogeneous and multi dimensional use of place. We can and should seek to include place with the same reverence alongside our discussions of age, class, race and gender. Further to this, I seek a more nuanced and critical engagement with the concept. I am reticent, however, to prescribe a path for this project. I firmly believe that doing so would constrain the process; acting to exclude or marginalise debate across and within the breadth of ontological and epistemological perspectives that inform our field of endeavour. My hope is that this paper will serve as a platform from which discourses around the value of place to the sociology of youth can begin.

These are exciting times for society and as such for our discipline; let us ensure that place is recognised for its value to meaning making. The goal of this paper has been to argue for a more dedicated focus on the impact of place in our work, a focus which can exist alongside the discourses of globalisation that now permeate our writing. It gives me hope that in discussions with students I have often observed an acceptance of place existing in

harmony with an eagerness to engage with the dissolution and abandonment of the same. This suggests that these opposing theoretical perspectives need not present an insurmountable dichotomy: there *is* space for place in our work.

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Footnotes

1. 'Space' and 'place' are not synonymous (Giddens 1994; Casey 2001) but are related concepts within spatial fields of inquiry. Distinctions between these concepts and the associated variable 'time' are not addressed in this paper. As such, 'space' is a reference to spatiality and thus place.

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