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Gerard Kyle and Garry Chick


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The Social Construction of a Sense of Place

GERARD KYLE
Texas A&M University
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
College Station, Texas, USA

GARRY CHICK
The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
State College, Pennsylvania, USA

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the meanings recreationists tenting at an agricultural fair associated with the settings in which their fair experience occurred. Using a symbolic interactionist framework, our analysis of data collected through onsite observation and using photo-elicitation guided interviews illustrated that informants’ place meanings were the product of interactive processes involving the individual, their social world and the physical setting. These interactions elicited meanings tied to place that were largely independent of the physical attributes that defined the setting. Most significant were specific place experiences shared with family and close friends. The importance attached to these relationships and experiences were embedded in the spatial contexts that encapsulated informants’ fair experience. Findings from this investigation shed light on the social construction of place meaning within a built environment.

Keywords agricultural fair, sense of place, symbolic interactionism

Introduction

The study of place meaning has fallen under the rubric of work related to place attachment in the leisure literature. This research has been primarily concerned with the intensity of recreationists’ attachment and less so with the reasons for attachment. Most researchers’ operationalizations of the construct have adapted Williams and Roggenbuck’s (1989) two-dimensional conceptualization of place identity and place dependence (e.g., Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003; Kyle et al., 2003; Moore & Graefe, 1994; Warzecha & Lime, 2001; Williams et al., 1992). Place identity focuses on the emotional and symbolic meanings recreationists ascribe to recreation settings, and place dependence relates to the functional utility attributed to the setting because of its ability to facilitate desired leisure experiences (Williams et al., 1992).

While this research has contributed to an understanding of the role of place within the context of the leisure experience, it does not adequately represent an understanding of human-place bonding reflected in the broader literature. For example, Low and Altman...
(1992) noted that humans’ attachment to place may also involve social relations. They suggested:

Social relations that a place signifies may be equally or more important to the attachment process than the place qua place... Places are, therefore, repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just the place qua place, to which people are attached. (p. 7)

The purpose of our investigation was to explore the processes underlying the creation of place meaning among a sample of tenters attending an agricultural fair in rural Pennsylvania. The theoretical framework employed was couched within symbolic interactionism. This perspective followed from Lee’s (1972) earlier work and suggested that place meanings are socially constructed by members of a cultural group.

Literature Review
We begin with an overview of several concepts used by place researchers to label the phenomena of human-place bonding and provide justification for our adoption of the term “sense of place.” We discuss the social constructivist orientation employed to understand the meanings people associate with physical landscapes and the need for further inquiry in the context of leisure. We conclude with a review of leisure researchers’ past work related to the meanings recreationists associate with their leisure experiences. In this discussion, we highlight commonalities between approaches to understand place meaning and the meanings recreationists’ associate with their leisure experiences.

The Plurality of Place Concepts
Scholars studying the relationship between people and the physical landscape have used a variety of terms to describe this phenomenon. Part of this heterogeneity is likely attributable to the various authors’ disciplinary origins, which carry differing ontological and epistemological perspectives. Varied study contexts (e.g., built vs. natural environments, long-term residents vs. transients) have also added to the plurality of concepts. Regardless of this variation, these concepts share much in common.

First, Low and Altman (1992) used the term “place attachment” to refer to the phenomena of human-place bonding. While they stressed that “affect, emotion and feeling are central to the concept” (p. 4), they also indicated that these emotional elements “are often accompanied by cognition (thought, knowledge and belief) and practice (action and behavior)” (pp. 4–5). In their discussion, they did not differentiate place attachment from other place-related concepts and suggested that “place attachment subsumes or is subsumed by a variety of analogous ideas” (p. 3).

In slightly different conceptualization, Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) suggested that place attachment is a distinct component of a broader and more encompassing concept called “sense of place.” They drew on attitude theory to defend a tripartite conceptualization of the construct consisting of affective, cognitive and conative components. Following from Low and Altman (1992), their use of place attachment solely described the affective relationship between people and the landscape. The other two components included place identity (i.e., cognitive dimension) and place dependence (i.e., conative dimension), which were each conceptually consistent with leisure researchers’ definitions.

Hay (1998) collected data from residents of a small coastal community on the south island of New Zealand and distinguished sense of place from the concept of place attachment
by suggesting that sense of place takes into account “the social and geographical context of place bonds and the sensing of places, such as aesthetics and a feeling of dwelling” (p. 5). He suggested that insider status and local ancestry were important in the development of a more “rooted sense of place.” In this context, Hay used rooted sense of place to refer to individuals who were long-term residents of a community that included both settlers and indigenous peoples.

Researchers working within a naturalistic paradigm have stressed the subjective nature of the sense of place construct. For example, Tuan (1977) distinguished between space and place by suggesting, “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (p. 6). In describing his interpretation of sense of place, Steele (1981) also referred to people’s subjective perceptions of their environments and their more or less conscious feelings about those environments. In a synthesis of the sense of place literature, Hummon (1992) suggested that sense of place was dual in nature “involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment” (p. 262). He indicated, however, that in the everyday world of personal and social life, emotional components likely dominate and perceptions of what places are like are always couched in a language of sentiment, value and other personal meanings.

Other concepts used to describe residents’ attachments to their homes and communities include “rootedness” and “insidedness.” Tuan (1980) suggested that rootedness implies “being at home in an unself-conscious way” (p. 4) where much of the landscape is taken for granted. Similarly, Rowles (1983) described the nature of human–place bonding among a sample of long-term elderly residents in an Appalachian community and noted that insidedness supports an overarching identification with a locale that is largely taken for granted and unconscious. Like rootedness, insidedness is also based on a lack of competing place experiences that allow for abstraction. Relph (1976) on the other hand, noted several levels of insidedness with the deepest, “existential insidedness,” consistent with Rowles’ conceptualization.

Regardless of the label used to describe human–place bonding, interrelated themes run through this literature. First, although scientists have tended to distinguish elements of place bonding into several abstract components (e.g., affective, conative and cognitive; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Low & Altman, 1992), research has shown that they remain closely interwoven. While the salience of each component often varies from context to context, strong emotional ties to place remain central. These emotions are often the product of repeated place interactions and experience and yield what Tuan (1980) referred to as the steady accretion of sentiment. Tied to these experiences and the emotion embedded in them, is the social context in which experience occurs. Meaningful place experiences most often occur in the presence of significant others (Hay, 1998).

**Sense of Place and the Construction of Place Meaning**

In the context of our investigation we used “sense of place” to describe informants’ relationship with place. Sense of place subsumed a variety of related concepts previously reported in the literature (e.g., rootedness, insidedness, place identity). As Hay (1998) suggested, “Sense of place studies . . . can be broader than those on place attachment by assessing . . . subjective qualities (the sensing of place to create personal meaning) and social context in a geographic region, as well as community and ancestral connections to place” (p. 7).

Hay’s (1998) conceptualization of sense of place and his emphasis on “personal meaning” and the “social context” also complimented the interactionist framework that we used to understand informants’ relationship with the setting(s) and the processes for forming
these relationships. Following from Lee (1972) and others (e.g., Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Milligan, 1998), this approach suggests that subjective definitions of place and the attributes contained within reflect self definitions conditioned by cultural affiliation. Rather than a collection of universally defined physical attributes, places are symbolic contexts imbued with meaning. These meanings emerge and evolve through ongoing interaction with others and the environment. The meanings individuals and collectives ascribe to a place are reflections of cultural and individual identity.

This process of place creation also serves to reinforce and shape individual and collective identity (Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Stokowski, 2002). Through place affiliation, people inherit socially constructed identities that help to distinguish our selves (i.e., individual and collective) from others. The degree that place identities are tied to the self is determined by the strength of the affiliation. Although a number of factors have been noted in the literature as influencing human–place bonding, Hay’s (1998) acknowledgement of ancestral ties and the history of place association had direct bearing on our investigation. All of our informants had spent their lives residing in the community surrounding the fairground. Many informants also had familial connections to the area, dating back to the 1700s. As we discuss later, these factors contributed to informants’ strong emotional attachments to the community and those tenting at the fairground.

While leisure researchers have acknowledged the socio-cultural process of place creation that influence recreationists’ interpretation and reaction to recreation settings (e.g., Stokowski, 2002; Williams, 2002), empirical examinations have been rare. Our review of the leisure literature unearthed only two investigations: First, Henderson and King (1999) examined the meanings teens associated with “teen clubs” at two public recreation centers. Their analysis illustrated that informants defined the space of the teen clubs as places where they “could find safety, be with their friends and feel less bounded by societal traditions” (p. 39). These places were contexts where informants felt free to resist traditional age-related roles and define the area as their own. At one center, an element of their informants’ place-creation involved painting the walls dark psychedelic colors and furnishing the club with worn, overstuffed chairs. These treatments were consistent with the teens’ identity and were symbolic of their desire to exercise control and autonomy within their lives.

In another investigation, Stedman et al. (2004) examined the place meanings and attachment of residents’ living within and around a Canadian national park. They observed that the meanings residents associated with the communities in which they lived were driven by the accumulation of life experiences shared with others. Special places within the community were defined by what had occurred there and with whom, rather than the physical attributes existent within the setting.

Socio-Cultural Influences on Meaning

Leisure researchers have been slow to acknowledge the influence of the socio-cultural context on the meanings recreationists’ associate with place, but instead have focused on meanings people associate with their leisure experiences. Among the first theoretical contributions to appear in the leisure literature was Burch’s (1969) “personal community hypothesis.” He suggested that patterns of leisure behavior are the product of social influences driven by social circles of workmates, family and friends rather than individual factors. Several authors (e.g., Buchanan, Christensen & Burdge, 1981; Cheek & Burch, 1976; Cheek, Field, & Burdge, 1976) extended Burch’s work to illustrate that social groups in leisure act to socialize members into leisure styles, develop particularistic meanings of activity and develop norms of behavior associated with the activity.
Recent work cast within a “social world perspective” continued this approach for understanding leisure behavior. In their synthesis of the social worlds literature, Scott and Godbey (1992) suggested that social worlds represent a unique scheme of life in which members share in a special set of meanings and in which various cultural elements... are created and made meaningful by social world members and serve to set the social world apart from other social worlds. (p. 49)

Scott and Godbey noted other characteristics of social worlds that help with understanding how individual meanings are created and dispersed throughout social world members. First, social world perspectives arise and are enacted through effective communication. They can also comprise smaller units that may evolve from members’ specialized interests and ideologies or simply because of geographic proximity to each other. Because people occupy a variety of roles throughout the day, they also interact with multiple social worlds that accompany these roles (e.g., family, leisure, work). Of the variety of social worlds that people encounter in their daily lives, however, Shibutani (1955) noted that of particular influence is the “primary reference group” composed of people with whom an individual has direct contact and to which a primary relationship is shared (e.g., family and close friends). Of particular importance within the context of our investigation was the influence of social world perspectives on members’ perceptions and behaviors. Evidence suggests that the meanings individuals associate with specific leisure experiences can be understood by examining the perspective of their social world (e.g., Choi, Loomis, & Ditton, 1994; Gahwiler & Havitz, 1998; Scott & Godbey, 1992).

Summary

If work published in major leisure journals is an indicator of the field’s knowledge of human–place relationships (i.e., reflected in the study of sense of place, place attachment), then an understanding of these phenomena is limited when compared to work published in the journals of other fields. Our review of the leisure literature illustrated the presence of three key disparities:

• persistence in using a narrow conceptualization of human–place bonding (i.e., the place dependence/place identity dichotomy),
• the exclusive examination of the phenomena within natural resource contexts, and
• the absence of work examining the process underlying the social construction of place meaning.

Conceptualizations of place bonding that have employed the place identity and place dependence dichotomy, while providing insight on the degree to which a place is meaningful, do little to inform why a setting is meaningful. This work also fails to adequately address questions related to the processes underlying the construction of recreationists’ place meanings. The almost exclusive use of natural resource contexts implies that an understanding of humans’ relationships with recreation places has utility only for natural resource management. Work appearing in non-leisure journals and the conclusions stemming from some leisure researchers’ work infers much broader applicability.

In response to these limitations, our research attempts to address these shortcomings by exploring processes underlying the creation of place meaning among a sample of informants that annually tent at an agricultural fair in central Pennsylvania. We adopted a social
constructivist orientation to understand the meanings our informants ascribed to the settings encapsulating their experience. This approach, grounded in symbolic interactionism, suggests that the meanings people associate with the physical landscape are the product of interactional processes involving the individual, the setting and their social worlds. The interactional processes and the meanings that emerge from these processes were the focus of our investigation.

Methods

Data Collection and Analysis

Our data were collected through semi-structured indepth interviews and personal notes maintained by the first author while acting as a participant observer. The primary unit of analysis was the informant and their social world composed of friends and family staying at the tent or visiting their tent site daily. Consistent with the tenets of “intensity sampling,” a form of purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), we sought information rich cases that would manifest the phenomena of interest (i.e., place bonding). Consequently, we requested from the tenting secretary a list of people’s names who had an extensive history of association with the fair (i.e., had been tenting for at least 10 years), and she provided 36 names. Although no informant directly declined to participate in the interviews, six informants never responded to the voicemails requesting an interview.

The logic underlying our criteria for choosing informants with these place histories was driven by several elements:

- Their extensive association with the setting increased the likelihood that they would be more knowledgeable of the social and spatial context.
- It was likely that these informants were more deeply rooted in the social world that shaped their fair experience and defined their place meanings.
- Their placement within the social fabric tied to the setting assisted in providing detail from an “insider’s” perspective.
- We expected that informants with these place histories had place-based stories to share that would provide insight on the nature of their interactions with the social and physical environment.

Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with informants who had been tenting at the fair for at least 30 years. The ages of informants ranged from 51 to 87 ($M = 71$ years). While all had been attending the fair since their early childhoods, two informants indicated that in their early years they attended primarily as casual visitors. All informants indicated residing in the “Valley” their entire lives. Several remained on the farms their parents had worked.

The interviews were conducted in informants’ homes using a photo-elicitation technique. A week prior to the interviews, we instructed informants to collect six to eight images that were representative of what the fair and the places within meant to them. We told informants that these images did not need to be photos and that any visual representation of their fair-related meanings would be satisfactory. Interviews lasted approximately 90–120 minutes. While the interviewer (i.e., first author) had a basic interview guide that contained questions that were asked of all informants (e.g., “Why these photos?” “What is meaningful about them?”), interviews typically began with discussion of the images in whatever order they chose and progressed depending on the informant.

Informants varied widely in the number of images they brought to the interview and ranged between 0 and 60 ($Mdn = 20$). Most informants brought older photos featuring family at their tent. These photos illustrated their generational ties (e.g., grandparents, parents,
children, grandchildren) to the tent site, fairground and broader community. For the informant who brought no images to the interview, the interview progressed as an informal discussion of his fair experiences and the places within the fairground where they had occurred. Stedman et al. (2004) noted that in the context of studying place meaning, photos help to represent both the spatial and social contexts simultaneously. Denzin (1989) also indicated that photo-elicitation techniques can assist informants with the expression of their thoughts, reactions and feelings and also provide the interview with a concrete point of reference. He noted that the use of photographs in an interviewing context makes both the interviewer and informant collaborators in the discovery process.

All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed and downloaded into Atlas ti qualitative software for analysis. Our analysis of the interview data began by parsing informants’ interviews to identify their narratives of place and experience. These narratives typically consisted of stories with a beginning and an end that focused on an event, incident or activity involving family members or friends occurring at their tent site or somewhere else on the fairground. After isolating informants’ narratives, we began open coding sections within each narrative that provided insight on the nature of the meanings associated with the setting(s). These meanings were reflected in the images they brought to the interview and articulated in their descriptions of the setting and experience. Through constant comparison, we sought specific evidence of how informants’ place meanings were constructed and maintained.

In addition to the interviews, the first author also attended the fair daily (i.e., 10 days) as a participant observer and tented for one night with a family. Over this time, a journal of fair experiences was maintained that was updated each evening. While interacting with a variety social groups (e.g., carnival operators, exhibitors, casual visitors) throughout the fairground, most of the time was spent talking with tenters and their primary reference group (i.e., those residing or visiting the tent sites). The data collected during this time were driven by four broad questions that provided further insight on how informants’ place meanings were constructed: (a) How do tenters arrange and interact with the physical space (i.e., objects, tents, and fairground)? (b) Who are the actors that comprise tenters’ social world(s)? (c) What symbols of place and experience are reflected in tenters’ language? (d) What behaviors occur within the space (i.e., tenting area and fairground)? These data were also transcribed and downloaded for analysis in conjunction with the interview data (i.e., open coding, constant comparison).

Findings

In presenting our findings, we begin with a general description of the study context. We then provide discussion of the settings encapsulating informants’ fair experience. The discussion of these settings provides a contextual understanding of the settings that underlie informants’ experiences. Informants’ perceptions of place and associated meanings were for the most part driven by what they did in the setting and with whom. Given the influence of informants’ social world on the construction of their place meanings, we also provided some insight on informants’ social world composition during the fair. This discussion highlighted the central role played by family. It also provided insight on how the socio-cultural lens through which informants’ experiences are interpreted impacted the meanings they associated with the settings.

Study Context

The Centre County Grange Encampment and Fair dates to 1873. Situated in Centre County in central Pennsylvania, the fair began as a day-long picnic organized by several local Grange
associations. Its primary purpose at the time was to provide farmers and their families from around the region the opportunity for social interaction (Lathbury, 1999). Over the past 30–40 years, many Grange associations across the nation have dissolved in response to dwindling memberships arising from the decline in family-owned farm operations (Sansom, 2000). However, the Centre County Grange Encampment and Fair remained robust and was the only one in the country that allowed tenting on the fairground for the duration of the event (Lathbury, 1999).

Today, the fair attracts more than 900 families primarily from around the region (i.e., predominantly Centre County) who tent for 10 days annually beginning the last week of August. The ethnic diversity of the families that tent strongly reflected the original Grangers who were German, English and Irish settlers. Many tenters were descendents of these original Grangers and maintained the exact tent site of their past generations. Most tenters occupied sites that were handed down to them by parents and grandparents. This familial network helped to maintain the tenters cultural homogeneity.

Most tenters spent their time chatting with family and friends at each others’ tent sites for the duration of the fair. Although they walked the fairground and enjoyed the carnival rides, exhibits and other attractions, the focal point of their experience remained at their tents. As a consequence of having annually tented at the same site for several decades, familiarity and bonds with other tenters evolved to produce tenting “neighborhoods” among tenters situated in close proximity. The images in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the style of tents and the configuration of the tenting community.

**The Spatial Context: Interactive Processes Shaping Place Perception**

Informants’ social worlds helped shape how they individually perceived the spatial contexts that encapsulated their fair experience. In addition to influencing definitions of spatial boundaries, the meanings they associated with the spatial contexts were shared constructions emerging from interactions with the setting and their social worlds. Broadly, three spatial contexts encapsulated their experience: (a) the family tent site, (b) the broader fairground, and (c) the local community or “Valley” where they lived beyond the fair. While these settings possessed salient physical boundaries identifiable by their location within the fairground and beyond the social composition and activities that took place within the
setting that demarcated the landscape were most prominent. For example, tent sites were places where family and friends socialized, ate, slept and retold stories of previous fair experiences. Since most of informants’ time was spent at or around this setting with members of their primary reference group, informants’ tents became the spatial locus of their fair experience. Their tent sites and to a lesser extent the tenting community and fairground were viewed as the “family gathering place.”

References to the family gathering place were salient in all phases of data collection. Family members were always present at informants’ tent sites and the tenting community, they were most often the central characters in informants’ narratives of past experience even when these characters had long deceased and they figured prominently in most informants’ images. The meaning that informants associated with their tents was most evident in discussions of family reunions held each year to coincide with the fair. Although several informants formalized their reunions with a Sunday afternoon dinner, all indicated that the 10 days of the fair provided them with an opportunity to reconnect with family members. Through these reunions, informants were able to celebrate their family histories and reinforce family ties. As seen in Mrs. Bl and Mr. Em’s quotes, these ties were embodied in the affection respondents expressed toward the containers of their fair experience:

Our tent in particular has become the family’s “Mecca” to which we return to each year. The metaphor of some kind of pilgrimage really does ring true. Some folk come from all over the country—California, Texas—just for the fair and to see their family for the week. And they do it every year. Our tent can barely contain everyone sometimes. We overflow out on to the street. During the fair, those not interested or able to stay at the tent stay at our place and walk down to the fair each morning. You don’t dare leave the tent . . . you might miss someone. (Mrs. Bl; See Figure 3)

You know, during the year, when we drive by the fairground, we are always reminded of how special the fair is to us. It’s like the fairground is some kind of bookmark that reminds us of what is coming. We try not to take it for granted, but this thing is so much a part of our lives. I get to see my children on a regular basis, but my cousins and even sometimes my brother, I only ever get to see at the fair. So when we drive by, the anticipation of seeing these folk is exciting. (Mrs. Em)
For the broader fairground, informants’ place meanings were somewhat more varied. While their interactions with these settings remained with family and close friends, these settings had the potential to support a broader range of experiences. More important, however, the setting and its physical attributes did not define the meaning informants associated with the place. Rather, their meanings were most often defined by their previous experiences (i.e., experiences shared with family and friends). Informants’ experiences varied as did the meanings they attached to the experiences and the settings encapsulating those experiences. In the two quotes below, each informant discussed why a particular ice-cream vendor situated along the “Midway” (i.e., the major commercial artery of the fairground) had come to mean so much to the fair experience. The meanings associated with the vendor were distinct. First, as can be seen in Mrs. To’s quote, the significance of the vendor was not so much the location or the product sold. Rather, it was the occasion that was facilitated by the vendor. Eating ice-cream with children and grandchildren was a favored ritual that reinforces family bonds:

When our children were kids, “Toby” would take them to a store that sells ice-cream along the Midway. The memory that stands out in my mind was when they were 3 or 4, he would drag them along in a little cart that he had made for the fair. One of the first things he did after we were packed and settled was to take them for ice cream. They loved it. Now he does the same thing, only with our grandchildren who are the same age. This doesn’t seem much, but these little things . . . little activities . . . play a part in why we love this so much. The ice cream is good . . . don’t get me wrong. But more special is the opportunity to do these things with the kids. I don’t take any of this for granted. (Mrs. To)

Alternately, for Mr. Ze the ice-cream vendor reminded him of his childhood with his brothers while living on the farm and seldom being treated to such food. Like Mrs. To, however, his affection for the vendor had little to do with the ice-cream itself but rather with his experiences with his brothers:

When we were kids living on the farm we rarely got to eat ice-cream. Boy, we’d talk about it all summer long . . . what flavors we’d get and whether or not one flavor was better than another. We’d actually argue all day about which flavor was better. While my oldest brother has since passed, my younger brother—“Donnie”—we still share an ice-cream during the fair. He always says that it doesn’t taste as good. (Mrs. Ze)
As seen in these two quotes, the same setting can be associated with distinct meanings. The variation in meanings was a product of the socio-cultural context through which the setting was experienced and interpreted.

The final spatial context that emerged from our analysis concerned the broader community often referred to by informants as the “Valley.” While onsite visiting several informants at their tents and listening to their discussions with other family and friends, it was apparent that the fair reminded many of them of their family histories and provided a context to remember deceased relatives. The stories of past experiences shared with others were central to this discourse. These stories invariably focused on ways of life and traditions that had since passed (e.g., farming practices and technology). Mr. Bl discussed (below) how the fair reminded him of his ancestral ties to the Valley. For him, these historical ties to place provided a sense of his own identity regarding where he was from and where he belonged:

My family has been farming in the Valley since the early 1800s. This house and farm actually belonged to my parents. They were among the first when the fair began as day-long picnic. When you have these kinds of ties to a place... deep roots... the Valley, the fair... they’re in your blood. With these ties, we know who we are... where we came from... how we got here. I don’t think about it much. It’s only after you called and we began looking for some photos that kind of capture what I mean. It’s hard to express this. I don’t know what else to say... the Valley and the fair are me. I imagine others that you’ve spoken to that have lived here as long as we have would say much the same thing. (Mr. Bl; See Figure 4)

The fair also provided a context for informants to reconnect with other community members residing in the Valley. All informants noted that opportunities to see old friends during the fair reinforced their attachment to the community. As with the spatial contexts, their affection was more strongly associated with the social landscape rather than the physical attributes that defined place.
For informants’ social worlds at the fair, the primary reference group consisted of people staying at their tent site. Members of this group were the most influential in shaping the meanings associated with the fair and its settings. This group most often consisted of brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren. By observing the interactions among the different generations of family (and later discussed within their interviews and presented in their images), the first author was able to observe how an appreciation for the fair and what it represented was passed from one generation to the next. Although the importance of family relationships likely was reinforced throughout their lives beyond the fair, the fair provided a cherished opportunity to celebrate these relationships. Mrs. Be discussed how important values were passed among generations at the fair, and Mr. Em discussed why the fair and settings had come to mean so much (i.e., the gathering of family and friends):

With all of the family gathered together around the tent... and at any time we can have 15 or 16 people sitting around the tent... there are so many opportunities to learn. I remember sitting on my grandfather’s lap listening to stories of his mother and father. Now, I see my husband telling stories to our grandchildren about our parents. It’s the same thing. I try to teach our children that family has always come first... no matter what. The thing that I loved about my parents’ stories that I remember to this day, is that they give me an understanding of where I came from and why I love this Valley. (Mrs. Be)

The fair is like one big happy family reunion. I mean, when I drive by the fairground during the year, I can’t help but think about my brother, or my wife’s brother, or whoever. We don’t get to see them as much as we’d like during the year, but it’s OK, because we know that we’ll always see them at the fair. (Mr. Em)

Another element arising from informants’ generational ties concerned the stability of the shared meanings associated with the fair and its settings. Several factors that stemmed from informants’ family histories and traditions acted to support the perpetuation of these meanings. First, as noted, most informants’ tent sites were inherited from their parents or grandparents. They had also maintained their involvement with the fair throughout the course of their lives. This behavior was typical for most members of the tenting community. A product of this longevity and cultural homogeneity was the maintenance of core values (e.g., protection of family values) and behaviors among tenters. Generational interactions such as those discussed by Mrs. Be above acted to preserve ways of knowing and experiencing the fair so that some meanings endured beyond an individual lifespan. Mr. Eu, who was 87 years old and had been tenting at the fair since he was a baby, commented on his perceptions of how the fair changed over the years:

For me, the fair hasn’t changed a bit. While I guess more has been added in terms of games and places to eat... not much else has altered. A few new buildings have been added here and there. It’s because of this that it’s such a comforting place. I can count on seeing the same folk... well at my age you can’t really count on it... but you see the same folk each year. My children and grandchildren have their favorite places to eat... you can count on it year after year. The exhibit halls, the Midway, the parade... same time, same place. There’s not much nowadays you can count on, but these folk I can. (Mr. Eu)
Mrs. Rb provided some insight on the nature of family rituals and traditions that act to perpetuate meaning. As noted, family reunions were a significant component of informants’ fair experience and brought together several generations of family. These reunions were often structured around a Sunday afternoon dinner with the menu strongly reflecting their cultural heritage (e.g., “Pennsylvania Dutch”—pig’s stomach, shoe fly pie). The shared understanding of the location, timing and content of these traditions helped to preserve modes of fair experience and the meanings associated with place:

The highlight of the fair for me is the Sunday afternoon dinner. All of our family gather at our tent. I don’t do any of the cooking anymore . . . . kids and grand kids all bring something. Our favorite is the pig’s stomach. It’s filled with sausage and potatoes and usually some bread crumbs and celery and onion. It’s roasted. (Mrs. Rb)

As touched upon in Mr. Eu’s comments, the stability of informants’ place meanings could also be attributed to the fair’s administration and vendors. Many of them also tented at the fair or had been working at the fair for several decades. Beyond fair rules and highly crystallized social norms governing tenters’ behavior (e.g., no alcohol, noise ordinance, curfew, quiet after 10 pm), the spatial layout of the fair changed little over the years. The interviewees beyond Mr. Eu noted that this familiarity was comforting and allowed for the steady accretion of sentiment as informants built their own place experiences year after year.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the processes underlying the creation of place meaning among a sample of tenters attending an agricultural fair in rural Pennsylvania. Our analysis, couched within a symbolic interactionist interpretive framework, illustrated that the meanings informants associated with the settings encapsulating their fair experience were social constructions largely independent of the physical qualities embodied in the setting. Key to understanding these constructions was the role played by informants’ primary reference group—a social world consisting of family and close friends. Common among members of these social worlds was an understanding that the fair provided a spatial context to celebrate their relationships with one another and reconnect with those closest to them. Their strong ties to these social worlds were reflected in the homogeneity of their perspectives relating to place and the experiences shared within these places. In addition to exerting influence on the nature of informants’ place meanings, the relationships they shared with social world members was also an important factor underlying their bonds to place.

Of the processes underlying the construction of informants’ place meanings, these data illustrated that the experiences shared within the spatial units were the most prominent. Although a number of studies have documented the importance of past experience and place interaction as a strong predictor of the extent place bonds are formed (e.g., Hammitt, Backlund, & Bixler, 2004; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2004; Moore & Graefe, 1994), they provide little insight on how this interaction shapes personal and shared meaning. As these data and others have illustrated (e.g., Stedman et al., 2004), it is the place meanings to which recreationists bond rather than the physical attributes that constitute the setting. Through shared experience, our informants constructed a myriad of personal narratives that were spatially anchored. These narratives were annually shared, refined and embellished among social world members. The rituals and traditions of the fair also ensured opportunities for reflection and the sharing of stories tied to past experience. In the context of family reunions, the traditions (e.g., Sunday afternoon dinner) brought together a mix of generations. The
intense interaction among these generations and the sharing of personal narratives supported
the perpetuation of meanings tied to the fair and its settings.

Our informants’ place experiences also provided insight on how they perceived the
settings that encapsulated their fair experience. We presented three spatial contexts that
varied in specificity and scale: informants’ tent sites, the fairground and the Valley. Most of
their fair experience was spent in or around their tent sites. This intense interaction provided
a context for the sharing of stories related to the fair and its settings. Through these stories,
meanings tied to place were conveyed, reinforced and preserved.

In the context of the broader fairground, informants held more individualistic meanings.
Because their experiences throughout the fairground were most often shared with members
of their social world, the broader fairground had the potential to support a more diverse
range of experiences associated with these settings. While this might infer that the physical
attributes defining place play a more prominent role in the construction of informants’ place
meanings than we noted, we remain committed to the suggestion that these meanings were
socially derived. Mrs. To and Mr. Ze provided this evidence when they expressed differing
meanings toward the same place (i.e., ice-cream vendor) based on earlier experiences.

The final spatial context that emerged from our analyses referred to the Valley in which
informants lived. References to family histories and ancestors residing in the Valley often
permeated their stories of past experiences. In addition to providing another connection
to place that strengthened their attachment to the environment, these historical ties served
to reify informants’ own sense of self. As illustrated in the quote by Mr. Bl, these ties
provided informants with an understanding of how they came to be in the Valley. These
deep, rooted ties to the Valley strengthened their association with the community and its
collective identity.

Conclusions

These findings highlight the need for leisure researchers to give greater consideration to
the social context in which leisure experiences are shared in their conceptualizations of
place-related constructs (e.g., sense of place, place attachment). Despite Lee’s (1972) early
observations of these phenomena, little has been presented in the leisure literature to further
explore how social networks influence the meanings recreationists associate with place along
with their attachments to the social landscapes in which leisure experiences are enjoyed.
Although acknowledgement of humans’ attachment to social landscapes and the social con-
struction of place meanings have long permeated other literatures (e.g., Brandenburg & Car-
roll, 1995; Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Gustafson, 2001; Hay, 1998; Hidalgo & Hernández,
2001; Lalli, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992; Mesch & Manor, 1998; Milligan, 1998), few ex-
amples can be found in the leisure literature. Notable exceptions include Stedman et al.’s
(2004) recent qualitative work along with Kyle and colleagues’ (Kyle, Absher & Chan-
cello, 2005; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005) efforts at “operationalizing” recreationists’
social bonds to place. These examinations, however, reflect leisure researchers propensity
to study human-place relationships within natural contexts alone and leave open questions
concerning the consistency with which social attachments exist across other spatial con-
texts (e.g., built environments). In addition, social processes underlying the construction
of place meaning have all but been ignored empirically. Although this paper makes some
progress toward illuminating our understanding social phenomena related to place meaning
and attachment within the context of leisure, we argue that much remains to be understood.

We also acknowledge that the extent to which social worlds influence the development
of place meaning is likely to vary by context. For our informants, the meanings tied to place
were ground in memory, experience and social relations. Less significant were the physical
attributes that comprised the settings. In other contexts, the physical environment may play
a more prominent role in underlying people’s attachment to the setting. While the meanings they ascribe to elements of the physical landscape were socially conditioned, the foundation of their attachment emanated from processes that more explicitly linked meanings to attributes within the setting. For example, in contemporary western culture more specific meanings are tied to natural and pristine environments (e.g., solitude, aesthetic beauty) than to historic and culturally significant settings. What remains poorly understood are the conditions (e.g., setting contexts, specific populations) in which the physical environment influences people’s attachment to place. Recent efforts have been made to explore this issue (e.g., Eisenhauer, Krannich, & Blahna, 2000; Milligan, 1998; Stedman, 2003; Warzecha & Lime, 2001), but much remains to be learned.

Our use of the term “sense of place” to describe the collection of meanings informants associated with the different spatial contexts followed from Hay’s (1998) suggestion that sense of place is a more inclusive term than place attachment and other terms (e.g., place identity, place dependence) that reflect more specific associations with place. His review of sense of place studies highlighted elements that we observed within these data and were complementary to the interactive framework guiding our analysis. These elements included the importance of community and ancestral ties to place, the social context within a spatial region and the role of subjective experience in shaping place meaning. Hay suggested that these elements provide a more holistic understanding of humans’ relationship to place than are conveyed in work that has employed other concepts. We recommend that leisure researchers follow Hay’s and others’ (e.g., Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001) suggestion to use place-related terms more judiciously.

Finally, while we encourage efforts to quantitatively examine sense of place and related concepts, exploration of the meanings humans associate with place using photo-elicitation techniques should continue. The utility of photo-based methods for leisure research was recently documented in a special issue of the Journal of Leisure Research. In that issue, Stedman et al. (2004) provided an example of one application of the approach for the study of place meaning. In the context of this investigation, the process of collecting photos and discussing their meaning helped informants better understand the personal significance of the settings that encapsulated their experience. Several informants indicated that much about the fair including the setting had been taken for granted throughout their lives. Because the settings were never under threat, they had no cause to contemplate abstraction from the fair. In the process of collecting their images, informants waded through several generations of photos that reflected their enduring association with the fair. Their photo collections reflected their own personal narratives of the fair and why these places were important to them. We learned much about interactions with the setting and feelings toward the various spatial contexts while onsite, but during the discussion of their images informants were able to describe at length why these settings had come to mean so much. As outsiders, many places that seemed inane were, in fact, intensely imbued with meaning by informants. Thus, as we learned through the conduct of this study and further evidenced in Stedman et al.’s work, applications of these procedures were well suited for understanding how individuals and groups felt about places within their own communities.

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References


