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CHAPTER 5: **Community Place Attachment and its Role in Social Capital Development**

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Place attachment (PA) is a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary concept focused at different levels with many definitions. Most view it as both positive and powerful. To humanistic geographers, people’s bonding with meaningful spaces represents a universal connection that fulfills fundamental human needs (Relph, 1976). To community psychologists and sociologists, attachments to one’s town or residential neighborhood, or to particular places in one’s community, are important motivations for people to spend more time outdoors in those places, to meet and talk to one’s neighbors, to share their concerns about local problems and ideas for solutions, and rather than flee, to stay and fight—i.e., participate in efforts both informal and organized--to preserve, protect, or improve the community (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Those efforts are often in response to some perceived threat to residents’ health, safety, property, and/or quality of life, which may also disrupt the very place attachments that led to residents’ community commitment and engagement (Brown & Perkins, 1992).

This chapter reviews, analyzes, and builds upon theory and research across multiple disciplines on residential community PA and its relationship to social capital development in response to environmental threats. Specifically, we will explore the ways in which PA is shaped, nurtured, and experienced within the context of community, and what other community-focused cognitions and behaviors PA influences. How does community PA differ from other forms, focuses, and levels of PA? To what extent is community PA a shared or communal phenomenon and in what ways does agreement among members of a community regarding attachment to place manifest itself? How does community PA differ from related concepts such as community place identity and sense of community? How does community PA relate to social and place development or disruption? This chapter will be organized around a proposed new model of community PA and its relationship to social capital in response to environmental threats.

**Meaning of Community Place Attachment**

Before exploring community-level and community-focused PA, we should be clear on the meaning of PA. Brown and Perkins’ (1992) definition synthesized others across myriad disciplines:

“Place attachment involves positively experienced bonds, sometimes occurring without awareness, that are developed over time from the behavioral, affective, and cognitive ties between individuals and/or groups and their sociophysical environment. These bonds provide a framework for both individual and communal aspects of identity and have both stabilizing and dynamic features” (Brown & Perkins, 1992, p. 284).

Perhaps the most comprehensive model of PA was offered by Scannell and Gifford (2010) who postulated three dimensions of PA:

“The person dimension of place attachment refers to its individually or collectively determined meanings. The psychological dimension includes the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of attachment. The place dimension emphasizes the place characteristics of attachment, including spatial level, specificity, and the prominence of social or physical (both built and natural) elements” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 1).

The present chapter addresses all three dimensions of their framework, but is more concerned with *collective/group* aspects of PA. In terms of psychological processes, we see *emotional* bonds to home/community and *cognitive* aspects of place memory, knowledge, understanding, and meaning as important, but we emphasize collective *behaviors* to protect, preserve and defend one’s community; and while our focus is primarily on attachment to *residential built environments*, we note that threats to the *proximal natural environment* may elicit strong reactions, in part due to their simultaneous threat, or potential disruption, to community PA—i.e., at the community level, the built and surrounding natural environment are closely connected.

Urban and community sociologists identify home, neighborhood, and city levels of PA (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). “Community” scale is flexible and can mean one’s streetblock, neighborhood/village, or city and environs. Some include region or country as levels of community. We focus particularly on place-based communities, but acknowledge that one locality may be inhabited by multiple social networks or communities of interest or identity. Thus, how much PA is a shared or communal phenomenon and how agreement among community members regarding PA manifests itself are open and key questions.  A series of studies of PA in Salt Lake City, Utah, systematically examined the extent to which PA operates at the community (streetblock) vs. individual level and is related to other community perceptions and conditions. Multi-level analyses found that a substantial 24% of the variance in residents’ PA represents between-block differences (Brown et al., 2003). Even more variation in PA may reside at other community levels than streetblocks, such as neighborhoods and towns.

Community PA differs from other forms of PA in four main ways: *location, level, focus*, and *behavioral response*. The *location* of community PA is the local area surrounding one’s home. Community-*level* PA implies some level of agreement among community members. Consensus is greater in some communities than others, and in most places, residents vary greatly in their attachment to the same community. The *focus* of attachment obviously differs from objects, to homes, natural spaces, or even particular buildings or landscapes. The focus of community attachment is more holistic—it relates to the neighborhood, town, or city as a whole place. What makes community PA truly unique, however, are the complex place and social cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, in response to environmental disruptions or threats, that feed into an interpretive process at both the individual and community level and that lead to *collective, community-level actions, adaptations, or acceptance* of the disruption.

**Place attachment and community-focused social cognitions and behaviors**

PA is closely tied to various other community perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. A study of adolescents found that PA significantly predicts social capital and feelings of safety in all 13 European countries studied (Dallago et al., 2009). Another study found that community-level PA is associated with *fewer* perceived incivilities (e.g., gang activity), criminal victimization, and fear and *more* physical revitalization on one’s block (Brown et al., 2003; 2004a). PA is generally assumed to develop slowly over many years, but similar to reports of PA in many New Urbanist planned communities, Brown et al (2004b) found residents of a popular new subdivision had as high PA as long-time residents in the surrounding older neighborhood and higher than new residents of the older community. Geographic Information System mapping of block-level PA over time shows that the new subdivision may have actually depressed the PA of residents living nearby (Perkins et al., 2009). That study illustrates that human-made environmental changes can unintentionally threaten PA, and provides a methodology for measuring and spatially analyzing and presenting such effects.

While those effects confirm the importance of PA for quality of community life, we are particularly interested here in how community PA relates to other community-focused cognitions, emotions and social capital behaviors. Our aim is to develop an ecological model that integrates multiple environmental domains and levels of analysis for understanding the psychological dimensions of people’s interactions with community places, particularly when faced with some environmental threat or disruption. A helpful starting point is Manzo and Perkins’ (2006) framework of community-focused physical and social psychological concepts (see Table 5.1). It suggests that community attachment is primarily based on affective (emotional) bonds to places (PA) and/or to people (sense of community). Place and community identity are related, but seen as separate cognitive dimensions. The related behavioral dimension includes organized community participation and informal neighboring.

**Table 5.1**. A framework for organizing psychological concepts that focuses on community in both its physical and social aspects

Community-Related Dimensions

Place Social\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Cognitive Place identity Community identity

Affective Place attachment Sense of community

Behavioral Participation in Neighboring activities

neighborhood planning, Participation in crime prevention,

protection and improvement community celebrations

Source: Manzo & Perkins (2006)

**A Model of Community Place Attachment Leading to Collective Action, Adaptation, or Acceptance in Response to Environmental Disruption**

**Overview of the framework**

We use a disruption-response framework for presenting PA and related constructs and articulating their relations to social capital. This model is based on studies of local reactions to place disruption, which unfold “in a series of stages involving identification, interpretation, evaluation and forms of coping response” (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010, p. 277). The model builds on Devine-Wright’s stages of psychological response to place change (2009), but focuses on the place-related dimensions of the disruption and factors that shape the response process.

A disruption framework makes it easier to identify place-related individual and community processes, because disruption triggers and illuminates otherwise latent or taken-for-granted states and attitudes. The framework shows place-related cognitions, affect and behaviors in action and interaction. The framework consists of the stages of disruption, interpretation, and response. Disruption is the environment-originating change to the place and its routines. The form of change is not as important as how it is interpreted and evaluated (Devine-Wright, 2011). The resulting response depends on those interpretations and existing community capacity and social capital (e.g. resources; leadership, political connections). Mobilization for opposition or acceptance and adaptation to the changes are the two broadest responses, but apathy or denial are also possible outcomes.

**Figure 5.1.** A framework of individual and community place attachment influences on interpretations of environmental disruption and behavioral outcomes.

Community level variables

Place-based social interactions (networks, bonding social capital)

Place definition

Environmental disruption

Interpretive processes

Community response

(mobilization & action, adaptation, or acceptance)

Bridging social capital

Neighboring &

citizen participation

Sense of community

(social bonding)

Place bonding

Collective efficacy

Place identity

Place (inter)dependence

Individual level variables: Cognition Affect/Emotion Behaviors

Our main focus is on the factors that shape and are shaped by this sequence of stages. We conceptualize and describe these place-related psychological factors and their influences on community response processes. The factors operate on the individual or the community level. We also classified them into cognitive, affective and behavioral. For brevity, these factors appear independent of each other, but they are often related in multiple ways.

**Environmental Disruption**

The first component of the model is any disruptive community-level environmental stimulus--a natural or human-made disaster, a planning decision, building demolition, or just the possibility of some significant environmental change. This is not necessarily a threat model, however, because the evaluation of the change depends on the interpretive processes on the individual and community level.

**Interpretive Processes**

PA researchers have called for going beyond the study of physical aspects of disruption to the socially-constructed impacts on the community (Devine-Wright, 2009; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Interpretation of the environmental disruption occurs on the individual and community level by identifying the change, framing it in terms of the physical and symbolic aspects of place, and evaluating it with regard to the centrality of the place and its disrupted features (Devine-Wright, 2009). The community interpretive processes take place in the networks of social interactions in the place. The following paragraphs describe the PA factors in our model and their relationships to the interpretive processes (see Figure 5.1).

**Place definition**

The first PA component of the model is place definition--the socially constructed and negotiated boundaries of the place, and the features and attributes that give it a distinctive identity in the minds of dwellers (Schneider, 1986): what belongs here, what fits in the place, what makes it unique. The place boundaries are socially constructed and defined differently by different groups of dwellers. For example, in one study residents living in a protected area defined the place more narrowly than people living in the same region but outside the parks (Bonaiuto et al. 2002). Similarly, Tapsuwan et al (2011) found that “social boundaries can extend beyond geographical or management boundaries of a place” (p. 32).

As for the identification of the place, several studies show how the acceptance of a change in the place depends on the compatibility of the changes with its symbolic, cultural, historic or functional meanings. Venables and colleagues (2012) studied attitudes toward construction of a new nuclear plant in communities close to existing nuclear facilities. They found that attitudes depended on the perceived contribution of the nearby nuclear power station to the sense of place, and were actually positive for the residents of communities defining their place through the nuclear station. In two studies of attitudes toward industrial development of renewable energy, Devine-Wright demonstrated the importance of the definition of place for the evaluation of change. In one case (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010), opposition to an offshore wind farm arose from the contradiction “between a place represented in terms of scenic beauty that provides a restorative environment for residents and visitors, and a wind farm that will industrialize the area and ‘fence’ in the bay” (p. 271). In the other study (Devine-Wright, 2011), supportive attitudes to a tidal energy converter in one location suggested that the project enhanced rather than disrupted PAs, “with contrasting sets of meanings proving significant in each context” (p. 336). The introduction of place definition in the framework is consistent with Lewicka’s recommendation (2011) to direct more attention to the place component of PA to overcome the disproportionate attention to the person. Within the interpretive processes of the framework, environmental disruption is translated into the degree of disruption of the defined place: Is the change in or outside the place? Is the change compatible with the place?[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Place dependence**

Place dependence is an established dimension of PA on the individual level (see Kyle et al., 2004), along with place identity (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989), that influences the interpretation of environmental disruptions. Raymond, Brown, and Weber (2010) recently drew on this conceptualization for their model of PA defining it as a “functional connection based specifically on the individual physical connection to a setting” (p. 426); it indicates how well a setting serves an intended use by the individual over a range of alternatives (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Individuals depend on the place for certain desired activities and experiences and are less willing to use another site (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989).

Place dependence and place identity (see below) can actually have opposite effects on attitudes toward changes when development enhances the usability and functional value of a place (Kyle et al, 2004). In our model, an environmental change is evaluated on an individual cognitive level according to its disturbance of one’s place dependence: Will the change enhance or impede the way the place is used? What alternative places can be accessed for this use?

The dependence relation between individual and place is not one-directional. This is consistent with Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) process dimension of PA. The influence of an individual over a place is related to cognition of the place as an extension of the self (a dimension of place identity; Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010), a sense of ownership of the place (identity-related symbolic meaning), or investment in place (functional meaning).

**Place identity**

The other component of a two-dimensional PA construct is place identity. Place identity is “a cognitive mechanism, a component of self-concept and/or of personal identity in relation to the place one belongs to” (Hernandez et al., 2010, p. 281). “The interpretation of the self would use environmental meanings to symbolize or situate individual identity. Thus one’s identity can be partly formed, maintained and transformed in relation to features and uses of everyday environment(s)” (Bonaiuto, 1996, p. 160). Thus place definition and place identity are related because significant features defining a place are likely salient aspects of identity grounded in that place. Place identity is based on our symbolic dependence on a place, the extent to which it serves a meaning-making function about who we are. Place identity is related to negative attitudes to environmental change and their evaluation as a disturbance (e.g. Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Kyle et al., 2004). In the interpretive stage of our model, place identity affects the positive or negative valence of one’s attitudes to environmental change after it has been defined in terms of the place and its use.

**Place Bonding**

Place bonding is the component of the interpretive process portion of the model that is most central to PA. Although there are community aspects of place bonding, it is primarily individuals’ emotional ties to a geographic location. Two things are important in this conceptualization of the “affective-emotional bond” (Hernandez et al., 2010) that people establish with places. First, we conceptualize place bonding as the affective link to *both* natural and constructed physical environment, in contrast with scholars who frame it as nature bonding only (Raymond et al., 2010). Second, PA may be a higher-order construct comprising place identity and place dependence (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989) or, if equated with place bonding, just part of a still-higher-order concept such as sense of place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). By using “place bonding” in our model, we let the reader conceptualize PA as any combination of place definition, place dependence, place identity, place bonding, and/or social bonding. .

Place bonding is a critical part of the framework for community PA because it has a negative relationship with acceptance of place disruption (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001). Place bonding has a judgment function similar to that of place identity for attitudes toward change. Stronger emotional connection to place begets a more negative attitude to disruption. However, this association is not so simple. Devine-Wright (2011) and Venables and colleagues (2012) describe cases where stronger PA was associated with acceptance of development. It is worth exploring whether this was due to other interpretive processes regarding the change or a curvilinear relationship– those most attached to a place might accept and rationalize an inevitable disruption, in accord with cognitive dissonance theory, while those least attached welcome any change.

**Social Capital**

As the first part of the model (left side of Figure 1) encompasses the influence of the physical environment and people’s psychological responses to community as place, the “dependent” side of the model (right side of Figure 1) is all about people’s responses to the social dimension of community, or the concept of social capital (SC), and their behavioral response, individually and collectively, to the whole disruption-interpretation process. Perkins et al (2002) define SC as “the norms, networks, and mutual trust of ‘civil society’ facilitating cooperative action among citizens and institutions” (p.35). At the individual level, Perkins and Long (2002) proposed a two-by-two SC framework: one dimension distinguishes intrapsychic (cognitive/affective) from behavioral responses; the other contrasts informal/spontaneous versus formally organized responses. This yields four components of psycho-behavioral SC: the informal, affective component is social bonding (or sense of community); the informal behavior is neighboring; the organized, cognitive component is collective efficacy (or empowerment); the organized behavior is citizen participation. Each of these is examined further below.

**Collective Efficacy (Empowerment)**. Empowerment can be thought of as people’s confidence in the efficacy of organized collective action with their neighbors. Empowerment has been defined as a multi-level process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) or more simply as “voice and choice.” Environmental hazards can be disempowering, as average citizens often have little control over them, unless they collectively mobilize (Rich et al., 1995). Thus empowerment and collective efficacy are critical to community development and environmental protection (O'Sullivan et al., 1984; Saegert & Winkel, 1996).

**Sense of Community (Social Bonding).** Riger and Lavrakas (1981) identified two dimensions of PA that are inherently communal: a feeling of physical *rootedness* in the community, which is related to place identity and interdependence, and a sense of social *bondedness* with one’s neighborhood. These are core elements of sense of community (Nasar & Julian, 1995; Pretty et al., 2003), defined as feelings of membership or belongingness to a group, including an emotional connection based on shared history, interests or concerns (Perkins & Long 2002). Sense of community also involves neighbors’ trust in each other. It is the affective attachment to the social aspects of community or place and is called positive “social bonding” in Raymond et al’s (2010) four-poles model of PA. As with PA and empowerment, it operates at multiple levels, but is primarily an individual-level phenomenon given its inherent subjectivity and wide variability within most communities. Emotional ties to one’s community are based not only on individual, intrapsychic processes but also on external, social processes that foster social cohesion and social control (Brown et al., 2003). It is the emotional component of both place bonding and social bonding which can powerfully motivate community members to mobilize and participate in collective environmental protection (or change) efforts. In fact, sense of community has been linked to PA at both the individual and community scale. Community PA is a precondition for the development of a sense of community (Rivlin, 1987), which in turn is linked to citizen participation (Cuba & Hummon 1993; Perkins et al., 1996; Perkins & Long, 2002) and other positive individual and neighborhood outcomes. Psychological and social processes at the root of a sense of community—feelings of mutual trust, social connections, shared concerns, and community values— lead to neighborhood-level action and cooperation.

**Neighboring**. Neighboring is the help we informally provide, and receive from, neighbors. Unger and Wandersman (1985) identified three components of neighboring behavior: (1) *social* support and network ties (community-level bonding SC); (2) *cognitive* mapping of the physical environment and symbolic communication (captured in our model by place definition, interdependence, and identity); (3) *affective* attachment to neighbors and to place (which we see as sense of community and place bonding). Neighboring also operates at both the individual and community levels, and is closely linked to place attachment (Brown et al., 2003), and the strongest, most consistent predictor of citizen participation (Perkins et al., 1996). Those people and communities who are so busy participating in civic organizations are the same ones also informally helping their neighbors.

**Citizen Participation**. Individual and community participation in grassroots voluntary associations (e.g., civic and faith-based organizations, local environmental groups) and other mediating structures is determined by both residents’ capacity to respond to environmental hazards individually and collectively and local institutions’ capacity for responding to those affected and involving them in making decisions (Manzo & Weinstein, 1987; Rich et al., 1995). Person-environment transactions of place, social bonding and identity are also important factors in residents’ participation in their community at both the individual and community levels (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Perkins et al., 1996).

**Place-based Social Interactions (Networks, Bonding Social Capital).** SC is generally defined in terms of “bonding ties” and “bridging ties.” Bonding SC is based on social interactions within the place, including neighboring and networks of trust as a community-level norm. These influence interpretive processes and are relevant to PA because social interactions are shaped by settings and spaces. Community attachment is related to social interaction and neighbors watching after each other (Brown et al., 2003). Such activities both stem from and create more social cohesion. In our model, social interactions in the place have several functions. First, place meanings are mediated through social interaction (Raymond et al., 2010). The community-level interpretive processes of disruption take place in the network of interactions between residents (in the top-right, community-behavioral component of the model). Second, social interactions are one of the disrupted everyday routines of a place. Third, networks also drive mobilization (Perkins et al., 2002), as mobilization builds on existing networks.

**Bridging Social Capital.** Bridging ties are the social connections people have that are based, not on emotional bonds, but on utility, with neighbors, local officials and merchants, and with influential people outside one’s community. Bridging capital is important for its literal connections to power and because bonding ties can inhibit dealing with conflict or controversial issues (Perkins et al., 2002). Although SC is usually considered at the community level, we locate bridging ties on the individual level (lower right side of Figure 1) because they only apply to certain individuals, usually with more mobility, alternatives and relationships outside the local community. Bridging ties (“cultural capital” in Lewicka, 2005) may be negatively related to PA. Having links outside the community (and possibly attachments and interests in other communities) may influence decisions in a negative way, which Lewicka calls the “paradox of social capital.”

**Community Response**

The response of the community may occur in many forms: mobilization, action, adaptation and/or acceptance (see far right side of Figure 1). Responses to place disruption transpire on both individual and community levels. Individuals may cope with the threat with denial or emotional or physical detachment from the place; or they can engage in individual or collective action in opposition to change or restoration of the disrupted place. On the collective level, communities may adapt to the disruption and redefine the place to accommodate the changes, or embark on oppositional or restorative collective action (see Devine Wright, 2009 for more details).

**Summary of the framework**

In sum, our model of community PA begins with an environmental disruption that elicits a response through a dynamic interpretive process influenced by various place-related cognitions, affects and behaviors on the individual and community level. Residents assess the environmental change by the disruption it might cause to their experiences in the place: the socially defined place, the personal investments in it, its habitual use, and the routine interactions within it. Their attitude toward the changes depends on their PA: the salience of the place to their identity, its uniqueness in serving their symbolic and material needs, and on their affective bond with the place and the community . The response to disruption materializes into action/opposition or acceptance/adaptation depending on perceptions of collective efficacy, the existing networks, participation practices and social capital.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has explored the particular meaning and significance of community-located and community-level PA. Its importance is partly psychological, in the same way that other forms of PA foster and support individuals’ personal sense of identity, stability, power, and development. However, community attachment differs from other forms of PA by connecting individuals to their neighbors and places throughout their neighborhood, town or city, thereby fostering and supporting a collective sense of *community* identity, stability, power, and development. However, what makes community PA unique is its integration in a complex and dynamic interpretive process linking both individual and community-level place and social cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in response to community-level environmental disruptions or threats which lead to collective actions, adaptations, or acceptance.

“Typically, literature on place attachment focuses on individual feelings and experiences and has not placed these bonds in the larger, sociopolitical context in which planners operate. Conversely, the community planning literature emphasizes participation and empowerment, but overlooks emotional connections to place” (Manzo & Perkins, 2006, p. 335). In contrast, a community perspective on PA and attention to community-level environmental disruptions (Brown & Perkins, 1992) reveal the potential for, and psychological processes of, PA acting as a catalyst for development of local SC and community mobilization and citizen participation in response to perceived threats to place. Our model connects place definition and place-based SC (networks and interactions) at the community level with place interdependence, place identity, place bonding, collective efficacy, and sense of community (social bonding) at the individual level, all influencing the interpretation of an environmental disruption and leading to neighboring, citizen participation and ultimately community mobilization and collective action (or adaptation or acceptance). Those actions may be confrontational in protecting and preserving the shared place and its quality of life, or they may be cooperative and constructive in planning and implementing development or revitalization of the community. If elements of individual place or social cognitions, emotional bonds, community place definition or SC are insufficient or negatively valenced, however, the response may be adaptation to, or acceptance of, the environmental disruption. If attachment is high, but SC low, it may result in residents staying rather than moving, thus preserving the community at least temporarily. But adaptation or acceptance may result in deterioration of the quality of both the social and physical environment, and ultimately the political and economic climate, health and wellbeing of the whole community. This can lead to out-migration of residents, further disruption of both place and social supportive bonds, and the end of the community at least for those members.

Like spatial awareness in general, place attachments are usually taken for granted. Yet they are powerful motivators for action to preserve and improve our communities for ourselves, our neighbors, and future generations. It is only through translating place attachments to social capital and collective action at the community level that the full benefits of attachments to cherished places and people are realized.

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1. For guiding principles on what might shape responses to these questions (i.e., how changes influence perceived historical continuity or distinctiveness of place), see Devine-Wright (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)