For better or worse: Exploring multiple dimensions of place meaning

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of people’s emotional relationships to places in order to learn about the kinds of places that are meaningful for people, the role these places play in their lives and the processes by which they develop meaning. Because such relationships have been most commonly explored through positive experiences of the residence, this research was undertaken to explore other dimensions of our relationships to places. To accomplish this, in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 participants in the New York metropolitan area. Qualitative analysis reveals the diversity and richness of people’s emotional relationships to places, indicating that place meaning develops from an array of emotions and experiences, both positive and negative. Moreover, findings demonstrate the socio-political underpinnings of our emotional relationships to places, particularly the impact of gender, race, class and sexuality, suggesting a need to further incorporate the full magnitude of the human experience into the current discourse on people-place relationships.

1. Introduction

Place-based theories and research on sense of place, place attachment, and place identity have made a critical contribution to our understanding of our relationships to place. In articulating the roles and meanings that places have in our lives, this work has validated important aspects of the human experience (Altman & Low, 1992). However, until quite recently, much of the empirical research has focused specifically on our relationships to residential settings, and on positive experiences of this setting (Manzo, 2003). Typically, rootedness to a particular place or locale has been considered a valued goal. Recent research, notably Gustafson’s (2001b) work on mapping place meaning, begins to explore relationships to an array of places. This research, along with studies of people’s experiences with nature, offers valuable insights into the fundamental dimensions of our relationships with places outside the residence, but further research is needed to better understand the full range of places with which we develop relationships and how these relationships are forged.

Moreover, because of the power and importance of concepts of belonging, protection and comfort, research has tended to focus on positive affective bonds to places (Moore, 2000; Manzo, 2003). Consequently, there is much we still do not know about how negative and ambivalent feelings and experiences contribute to place meaning. Brown & Perkins’ (1992) research sheds light on disruptions to positive relationships to place, illuminating the impact of negative experiences. But what if relationships to place are negative or ambivalent to begin with? Can we be trapped or stifled by relationships to place? How can these aspects of place relationships be understood? We must learn more about the full spectrum of people’s experiences in places if we are to understand the complex and multi-faceted phenomena that comprise our emotional relationships to places (Manzo, 2003). The research presented in this paper was therefore undertaken to explore these other dimensions of our emotional relationships with places, examining both the range of places to which people develop emotional bonds, and the range of experiences that create meaning.
1.1. Philosophical roots of place research

Much of the literature on people’s emotional relationships to places has roots in phenomenology (Bachelard, 1969; Relph, 1976; Seamon, 1982, 2000). This perspective provides a rich understanding of complex, intangible phenomena that do not readily lend themselves to psychometric measurement. Indeed, the phenomenologists call for a return to the everyday lifeworld of lived experience (Dovey, 2002) and a move away from the objectification of place and its meaning (Million, 1996).

Much of this work builds upon Heidegger’s (1971) notions of being-in-the-world seeking to explore the ontological primacy of place (Stefanovic, 2004). It also provides a conceptual language that allows us to explore everyday, often taken-for-granted experiences of place (Seamon, 1996). It is noteworthy that a number of theorists (Casey, 1993; Mugerauer, 1994; Malpas, 1999) examine place in a way that seeks to go beyond both reductionist paradigms and the focus on spatio-temporal location. They embrace both movement and rest (Seamon, 1979), “implacement” and “displacement” (Casey, 1993), insideness and outsideness (Relph, 1976), as part of the geography of the lifeworld. These continua and dialectic phenomena allow for a full range of place experiences both positive and negative, intimate and distant. The empirical work on place attachment and meaning has a great deal to learn from these conceptualizations.

1.1.1. A turn to a residential focus

While phenomenological conceptualizations of place are malleable and complex, they have often been explored through literal and metaphorical treatments of home. It has been argued that this focus stems from the fact that home represents the Jungian archetype of shelter, a universal construct in the human psyche (Cooper Marcus, 1995). Indeed, “home” is viewed as the central reference point for many researchers and philosophers (Bachelard, 1969; Buttiner, 1980; Korosec-Serfaty, 1984; Sixsmith, 1986). Bachelard (1969) argues that “our home is our corner of the world...it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (p. 4). Similarly, Norberg-Shultz (1985) claims that each individual needs a fixed place, which for him, takes the form of the house: “the faithful heart does not like to ramble about without a homestead. It needs a fixed spot to return to, it wants its square house” (p. 12).

As Riley (1992) points out, “this insistence on home as archetype persists...despite evidence all around us that home is an extraordinarily malleable concept” (p. 25).

As Moore (2000) has pointed out, “home” is frequently used as a spatial metaphor for relationships to a variety of places, as well as a way of being in the world (Hayward, 1975; Howard, 1993; Moore, 2000; Williams & McIntyre, 2001). For example, research has explored the concept of “at-homeness” as the “usually unnoticed, taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable in, and familiar with, the everyday world in which one lives, and outside of which one is visiting” (Seamon, 1979; p. 70). The components of this experience are rootedness, appropriation, or the sense of possession and control over a space, regeneration, at-easeness, and warmth (Seamon, 1979). This is a rich conceptualization of place experience, yet labeling these experiences as “at-homeness” obscures both our connections to places beyond the residence, and the impact of negative experiences of the residence, leaving unexplored the ways in which we can understand what is not home—literally or metaphorically. This is problematic because the concept of home has often been interpreted literally, reinforcing a view of the residence as a defining rubric in people’s lives (Moore, 2000; Manzo, 2003). This does not accurately reflect the nature of everyone’s experience of place, however.

The feminist literature provides an important critique of treatments of “home.” Ehrenreich and English (1978) argue that the romanticization of home emerged with the removal of the means of production from the domicile. They posit that this separation of the public and private sphere created an unreasonable expectation of the residence in which “all that is human must crowd into the sphere of private life” (p. 10). Martin and Mohanty (1986) add that social scientists “have responded to the rhetoric of home and family by merely reproducing the most conventional articulations of those terms in their own writing” (p. 191). They argue that this limits our understanding of the complex relationships to places and to the residence in particular.

Exploring place meaning by primarily examining experiences of the residence or rootedness in a community leads us to assume that those who do not have strong, positive affective bonds with their residence are placeless. Writings on mobility leave some authors lamenting the loss of place meaning (Tall, 1996), but for others the journey itself is meaningful. This is illustrated in the short story, “Going Home: A Poetic Memoir” in which a writer describes her life on the road (McElroy, 1996). The author explains that her “home,” is not one stationary location, but the process of traveling itself. She asks, “What is home if the road that draws you away from it is more familiar, more comforting?” In trying to make sense of her life, McElroy muses over the recurring dialogue she has with her mother: “Why you got to go to all those places?” Mama asks, “Because they are there,” I say. “All that going and coming,” she says. “Always going home,” I think” (McElroy, 1996, p. 34). Thus, the author finds her own answer: “Home is what you find when you get there. Home is any place on this planet” (p. 29). This particular story captures the dilemma posed by the language of home. It reflects the conundrum
encountered when writers and scholars go between literal and metaphorical interpretations of home, thus revealing the limitations of a residential framework (Moore, 2000). Here, Relph’s (1976) notions of insideness and outsideness seem more fitting. In his framework, movement does not necessarily imply outsideness; rather it reflects the fluidity of the lifeworld suggested in McElroy’s story.

Other nuances of place experience and meaning emerge in writings in cultural anthropology and geography on nomadic life, pilgrimage, and migration (Singh & Singh, 1987; Robertson et al., 1994; Rao, 2002). For example, studies of nomadic people such as the Bedouins of Asia Minor or the Yanadi of India, whose way of life depends on movement from place to place, reveal that their way of inhabiting the earth is not location specific (Rao, 2002). Huts and tents can be raised and taken down easily as people move about with their homes or construct new ones at each site (Altman & Chemers, 1986). In cases of pilgrimage, the site of one’s residence does not change, but the significance of the pilgrimage, and its impact on identity, place the same value on movement and journey that others put on their residence (Morinis, 1992). This work not only reinforces the idea of the subjectivity and fluidity of notions of home across cultures, it also emphasizes the social construction and dialectic nature of place meaning. Indeed this work significantly shifts our view of dwelling in a broader existential sense. As Rajchman (1998) notes: “Once we give up the belief that our lifeworld is rooted in the ground, we may thus come to a point where ungroundedness is no longer experienced as existential anxiety and despair but as a freedom and lightness that finally allows us to move” (p. 88). This work challenges us to think differently about the nature of our emotional connections to place.

1.1.2. A return to broader conceptualizations

Putting relationships to nonresidential places in terms of feeling “at home” gives primacy to a place and experience that does not necessarily reflect the complexity of people’s lives. It does not allow us to understand relationships to nonresidential places on their own merit and in their own terms, nor does it help to understand the less positive aspects of our relationships to our residence (Manzo, 2003). As the findings of the present research reveal, a whole array of places constitute our lifeworld and are of central importance in our lives, hence even this residential/nonresidential dichotomy has limited utility. But because of the cultural myths about home, its popular use as a metaphor for a way of being, and its literal translation in some research on place attachment, it is important to look at both residential and nonresidential settings and their role in people’s lives to get beyond this framework. Certainly, we can find warmth and a sense of belonging in many different places (Gustafson, 2001b), just as we can feel alienated in them (Manzo, 2003). Moreover, in looking holistically at place experience and meaning, we can see that experiences of belonging exist alongside experiences of alienation, that identity exists within the context of difference and that dwelling includes movement and change (Seamon, 1979).

Phenomenology of place has been wrongly conflated with essentialism (Dovey, 2002, p. 46). This manifests itself, in part, in explorations of home. But many phenomenological theories treat place and place experience in a more holistic way, seeing them as dialectic phenomena that take us beyond such essentialism and beyond the metaphor of home. In particular, Relph’s (1976) theory of insideness–outsideness provides a field of conceptual clarity for understanding a fundamental dialectic in place experience—that of belongingness and alienation (Seamon, 1996). For example, Relph’s concept of “existential insideness” is an intimate place experience, a situation of deep, unself-conscious immersion in place, while the opposite, “existential outsideness,” is a sense of strangeness and alienation (Seamon, 1996). Similarly, Casey (1993) calls for a renewed understanding of the “place-world” which allows for both “implacement” and displacement, and he sees elements of movement and journey as a part of dwelling. These are powerful frameworks for understanding place experience and meaning in all of its dimensions.

1.2. Range of meaningful places

The body of research on place attachment, identity and meaning has grown, sometimes building upon phenomenological theories, sometimes developing separately. Much of the early research on place attachment and meaning studied attachments to the residence and the immediate community. However, this research continues to grow in new directions, shedding light on the meanings of an array of places in our lifeworlds. This includes literature on people’s experiences with, and attachments to, nature and outdoor recreation settings (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989; Kaplan, 1995; Williams & Voske, 2003; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004). This research offers valuable insights into the ways that places outside the residence can enrich our lives and our sense of self. As a whole, this research uses diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. For example, some research looks at individual attachments, while others explore shared meanings, such as those among teens at a local recreation center (Henderson & King, 1999), and those among different ethnic and racial groups (Virden & Walker, 1999; Taylor, 2000; Low et al., 2002). Some studies also look at the role of collective memory on racially based meaning of wildland settings (Johnson,
(1998; Johnson & Bowker, 2004) (this will be discussed further in the next section).

While many studies on place meaning in outdoor recreation settings take a quantitative approach and endeavor to measure place attachments, some research engages in qualitative explorations of the lived experience of place within these settings. One recent qualitative study of campers’ long-term involvement in an agricultural encampment and fair uses narrative theory for an in-depth exploration of the meanings of this site (Kyle & Chick, 2004). Other qualitative studies explore wilderness experiences, revealing that these settings offer important, even spiritual, experiences (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999) and research on “deep ecology” describes people’s experiences with nature as integral to one’s sense of self (Nash, 1990; Fox, 1990; Zimmerman, Callicott, Sessions, Warren, & Clark, 1993; Bragg, 1996). As more is learned about relationships to natural environments, we see new dimensions of place experience and meaning unfold. While this has caused some scholars to argue that past research on place attachment “has produced simplistic interpretations of the person–place interaction” (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999, p. 22), I believe it suggests a need to expand current explorations to include the role and meanings of places beyond the residence or nature/wilderness.

The literature on community open spaces also sheds light on the importance of an array of places in our lives. For example, Hester’s (1993) community revitalization and design work in the town of Manteo, South Carolina gave careful consideration to the meaning that particular places held for the local townspeople. These places constituted what Hester and the townspeople called the “sacred structure” of the town—that is, those places that residents did not want harmed or altered. Similarly, Low’s (2000) work on Costa Rican plazas demonstrates the importance of town plazas in people’s everyday lives, on both a personal and cultural level. Both studies illustrate the value and meaning of a variety of places as well as the socio-cultural and political aspects of our relationships to place.

From these explorations, we can see that our relationships to places go beyond the realm of the residence and even the metaphor of home. In light of this, Heidegger’s (1962, 1971) notion of “being-in-the-world,” provides a particularly helpful, nuanced understanding of people’s relationships to places, the domain of which, he argued, extends beyond one setting. The concept of “being-in-the-world” allows room for a diversity of places and experiences, context and meaning, reflecting the dynamism of our relationships to places. In addition, the use of the term “being” suggests the impact of place on identity, as “being” is an ontological structure that Heidegger relates to place. Indeed, this is the work that phenomenologists often build upon. The present research seeks to further explore people–place relationships from this broader, dynamic perspective of Heidegger and the phenomenologists, exploring not only the range of places that are especially important and meaningful for people, but also the range of experiences that create meaning, in an effort to understand particularly what place experiences, if any, might go beyond home and haven.

1.3. Range of place experience

While earlier research on place attachment has typically focused on positive affect, scholars now call for a broader understanding of emotional relationships to places that incorporates negative and ambivalent feelings (see esp. Chawla, 1993; Howard, 1993; Manzo, 2003). Guiliani and Feldman (1993) suggest that conceptualizing relationships to place as “attachment” has made understanding negative experiences particularly challenging:

To speak of negative attachment contrasts with the everyday meaning of the world. The places where Nazi lagers were located are certainly ‘places’ with a strong emotive value, in particular for Jewish people. Would they say that they are ‘attached’ to them? (p. 272).

Relph (1985) also argues that “relationships to places need not be strong and positive,” (p. 27); sometimes there is strong affection for particular places (topophilia), but there may be an aversion for other places (topophobia) (Relph, 1985). Further, being connected to a place may give some people a positive sense of belonging, but for others it may feel oppressive and restrictive (Relph, 1976). This is what Chawla (1992) calls the “shadow side” of our relationships with places. She argues that “if place forms the circumference of our experience, we are attached to it for better or for worse. Therefore, there is a shadow side...composed of...frustrating or frightening places” (Chawla, 1992, p. 66). Research suggests that places where negative experiences occur are as meaningful as places where needs are met and succor is found (Ahrentzen, 1992; Kuribayashi & Tharp, 1998). Hence, “any exploration of place as a phenomenon of direct experience...must be concerned with the entire range of experiences through which we all know and make places” (Relph, 1976, p. 6).

Here, too, research on the human experiential dimensions of outdoor recreation settings sheds new light on the diversity of place experience. For example, a provocative literature on the meaning that African–Americans ascribe to wildland environments suggests that they are perceived as threatening because they resonate in African–Americans’ collective memory with the history of slavery, sharecropping and lynching, which often took place in uninhabited areas (Johnson, 1998). This has been confirmed in other studies of how
race, ethnicity and gender influence the affective meanings of natural environments and preferences for outdoor recreation settings, which show that Hispanic and African–Americans perceive forests as more threatening than Whites (Virden & Walker, 1999). This has even been connected to different levels of environmental concern and action between African–Americans and Whites (Taylor, 1989). Other research suggests that labor-related institutions such as forest labor and plantation agriculture have impacted negatively on African–Americans, producing an ambivalence toward wildland areas that sharply contrasts with the dominant perspective of these places as a refuge (Johnson & Bowker, 2004). Finally, an ethnographic study of a national park suggests how ethnic and immigrant groups can feel excluded because of a lack of sensitivity to cultural identity and lack of representation (Low, Taplin, Scheld, & Fisher, 2004). Together, these studies show how a socio-cultural approach to the study of place meaning enables us to better see a range of place experiences and meanings, both positive and negative. They also reveal how social constructions of identity impact place experience and create diverse meanings.

Some feminist research on place experience and meaning also provides insights into the diversity of place experience. In particular, research on women’s relationships to their residence has begun to de-mythicize the residence as unwaveringly positive (Castelino, 1998). For example, Ahrentzen (1992) points out that women’s experiences sometimes contradict images of the residence as a haven: “Home may not be a refuge but a place of violence” (p. 113). Similarly, Anthony’s (1997) study of the meanings of the residence to families who have experienced divorce reveals that it can be a painful place. In such cases, the family residence is a considerable source of stress, and may continue to be so even after the divorce, as those who leave sometimes feel evicted, and those who remain must adjust to changing meanings of the residence (Anthony, 1997). This study is one of the few that explicitly addresses negative experiences of the residence, and the dynamism of this relationship over time. In exploring these aspects of residential experience, it balances our perspective of the residence.

The significance of negative and ambivalent feelings and experiences of place are suggested in early definitions of place identity. Proshansky (1978) originally defined place identity as “those dimensions of the self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioral tendencies” (p. 155). In his later work with colleagues, he argues that place identity is comprised of a “cluster of positively and negatively valenced cognitions of physical settings” (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 62). It is noteworthy that these authors further posit that place identity extends “far beyond a conception of identity in which the home and its surroundings are the necessary and sufficient component referents” (p. 61) (see also Gustafson, 2001b).

Newer research exploring the fundamental dimensions of place meaning and identity adds further insight into the range of place experience. For example, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell’s (1996) work on place and identity processes suggests four essential principles—distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficiency—at play in our relationships to place. Similarly, Gustafson’s (2001b) identifies the underlying dimensions of place meaning as distinction, valuation, continuity and change. There is some noteworthy overlap in these frameworks, but important differences as well. For example, both identify distinctiveness as an essential principle but for Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, the focus is on the distinction of self, whereas for Gustafson the focus of distinction is on the differentiation of one place from another. Nonetheless, by focusing on the fundamental essence of place experiences, both of these empirically driven theories offer a more nuanced approach to understanding relationships to place that can embrace a host of places and experiences.

2. Methods

This empirical research uses a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which focuses on the nuances of people’s experiences to develop and explore concepts and theories. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with 40 participants to explore the nature of their emotional relationships to the places in their lives. As is typical of a grounded theory approach, data analysis began during the data collection phase to allow sampling to proceed on the basis of issues that emerged in the initial interviews. For example, throughout the data collection phase, a chart was maintained of the demographic data of participants, which was continually reviewed to ensure a diverse sample, varied on sex, ethnicity, income and household configuration, because these demographics emerged as important in early interviews.

2.1. Participant selection

Participants were obtained through a networking procedure beginning with referrals of potential participants from acquaintances. Initial contact with potential participants was made through preliminary telephone interviews during which participants were screened for certain characteristics (see paragraph below). Participants who met these criteria then participated in a
face-to-face interview. At the end of each interview, participants were requested to provide contact information for other potential participants. Telephone calls were made to these individuals to request their participation and screen them for eligibility. This sampling procedure follows Trost’s (1986) recommendation for strategic nonprobability sampling, which aims for variations in qualities of respondents as a way to explore phenomenon, rather than for representativeness for statistical generalization (Gustafson, 2001a, p. 671).

For this study, the sample was restricted to certain fixed variables to allow some uniformity among participants for comparison. Specifically, all participants were required to be: (1) residents of the New York City metropolitan area; (2) between 25 and 35 years of age; (3) employed outside of their residence at least part-time; and (4) were United States citizens who grew up in the United States. First, all participants were residents of New York City not only because of accessibility, but to provide a common base of experiences via a common current “hometown.” Exploring the environmental experiences of residents from one city makes it possible to examine the kinds of places that are important for urban dwellers living in the same city. Second, the particular age range of participants was selected based on the issues typically faced at this life stage. According to Horwitz and Tognoli (1983), adults at this age are “considering the importance...of becoming more at home in the world” (p. 337). While there is some debate about the validity of life cycle stages, selecting participants in this age range maximizes the possibility that they are autonomous, live away from their parents, and have made some conscious choice in where they live. Third, it was required that participants work outside of their residence at least part-time to ensure that they had adequate opportunities to engage in places outside of the residence. It was not necessary for this work to produce income, simply that it take place outside of the residence. Finally, it was required that all participants were raised in the United States to minimize issues of cultural differences. While there are many cultures and norms expressed within large metropolitan areas like New York, it is likely that young adults who were raised in the United States might share some similar cultural expectations about places.

In contrast to the fixed variables described above, the sample was selected to include a range of demographic variables such sex, race, ethnicity, marital status, parenthood status, sexual orientation, income, and residential mobility. These all have an impact on our experiences of places. For example, those with greater financial resources generally have access to more places than those with fewer resources. Conversely, it has been argued that poverty has its own location in space, most visibly in ghettos (Clark, 1989). Consequently, the sample exhibited variability with respect to these variables (See Table 1).

2.2. Demographics

As shown in Table 1, 24 of the 40 participants in the sample were women and 16 were men. Twenty percent of participants were gay or lesbian. Most (83%) rented their living space rather than owned it, which is fairly common in New York City. Twenty-three percent of respondents lived alone, while slightly more than half (55%) lived in two-person households. The remaining 22% of participants lived with two or more people. Of those living with one other person, 54% lived with either a spouse, fiancé or lover, while 46% lived with either a roommate or other family member, e.g. a sibling. Of those who lived with two or more people, most (67%) lived with other family members, while some (33%) lived with roommates and friends. Only two participants had children with whom they lived.

Educational background ranged from some high school experience (3%) to post-masters training, with 70% having at least a bachelors degree. Of the remainder, 20% had some college experience and 7% received their high school diplomas. Sixty-five percent worked full time and the remaining 35% worked part-time. Annual income ranged from under $10,000 to $105,000. Data indicate a representative mix of race and

| Table 1
| Demographic descriptors of sample |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Household size</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Housing status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>8</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some graduate school</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post masters training</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African–American</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed race</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

$N = 40.$
ethnicity. Fifty-six percent of participants identified themselves as White, 22% identified themselves as Black or African–American, 11% considered themselves Latino, 8% described being of mixed race and 3% were Asian. Three participants declined to provide data on race/ethnicity.

2.3. Interviewing procedure

In-depth, face-to-face interviews took place in a location of the participant’s choice. Interview questions were designed to explore participants’ experiences in places that they considered important and meaningful. Each interview was composed of a series of open-ended, in-depth questions which covered the following topical themes: (1) the meaning and importance of different places in the lives of participants; (2) feelings about and experiences in their places of residence; and (3) past environmental experiences, i.e. experiences with significant places from childhood and whether they affect feelings about current places (see Table 2 for sample questions).

Each interview was tape-recorded with the permission of the participant. No one declined being recorded. Tape-recorded interviews (n = 40) were then transcribed and content-analysed for common themes by conducting successive readings of the interview transcripts. Tables were then created that organized the data question by question across all 40 participants, with responses from each interview question appearing in separate columns. These tables facilitated the comparison of data across participants, and yielded critical themes in the data.

2.4. Data analysis procedure

Data were analysed using the “open coding” techniques typical of a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Here, conceptual labels are placed on responses that described discrete events, experiences and feelings reported in the interviews. A classification system was then developed for these concepts based on a comparison of all concepts represented in the data. Using this system, responses to each individual question were analysed across all participants. Next, each individual interview was analysed across all questions to identify meta-themes that emerged within each interview. Finally, after content-analysing all interviews, responses were examined for common meta-themes across all interviews. During this phase, the final “axial coding” was conducted. Here, “the data are put back together again in new ways after open coding, creating new connections between the various categories, resulting in new conceptualization of the data” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 97).

3. Results

3.1. The meaning and importance of places

Findings demonstrate the richness and complexity of people’s relationships to a whole range of places, both residential and nonresidential, revealing that these relationships are a fundamental part of their lives. Because the initial inquiry about important and meaningful places was asked in a nonplace-specific manner

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Table 2
Sample questions from the semi-structured interview instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. General place questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tell me about some places that are especially important and meaningful to you.(^a)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Are there certain places where you feel especially relaxed and comfortable?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Are there places that you like to go to be alone, to think or daydream?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Are there any places that you go to be around other people?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Are there places from your past that are important to you, which you haven’t been to lately but would like to go to again?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Have you ever lost a place that was special to you in some way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Are there any places that you still go to that were once special but have lost their meaning for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. What does the phrase being at home mean to you?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>II. Experience of the residence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. How do you feel about the place where you live now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. What do you like/dislike about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How many times have you moved since you first left your parents’ or guardian’s residence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. What was the best place you ever lived?</td>
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<td>13. What was the worst place you’ve ever lived?</td>
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<th>III. Past environmental experiences</th>
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<td>14. Are there particular places that evoke strong memories for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. When you think back to your childhood, what was the first place that was very important to you?</td>
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\(^a\) All questions included probes to explore the nature of participants’ experiences in each place mentioned, the qualities of those places, and the process of meaning making, i.e. how that place came to hold its particular meaning, what happened there, and what aspects of the place contributed to those experiences and meanings. For the full interview instrument, please contact the author.
and think shut herself in there ‘‘just to sit on the edge of the tub escape physical abuse and be assured of privacy. She was the only place in her household where she could woman mentioned the bathroom as a favorite place; it facets of interpersonal relationships. For example, one substance abuse, child abuse, death, sexuality and other significant and meaningful. This indicates that the residence is only one thread in a complex tapestry of meaningful places in participants’ lives.

Participants’ discussions of significant places tapped into critical life issues such as love, loss, identity, substance abuse, child abuse, death, sexuality and other facets of interpersonal relationships. For example, one woman mentioned the bathroom as a favorite place; it was the only place in her household where she could escape physical abuse and be assured of privacy. She shut herself in there ‘‘just to sit on the edge of the tub and think… and to look out the window and cry without fear of repercussions.’’ Thus, a place as seemingly mundane as a bathroom became a sanctuary for this woman. Another participant described a strong relationship with Israel, which is where he decided to come out as a gay man. He explained that:

it felt safer to do this far away, as my first step. If I could do that there, then I felt brave enough to tell family and friends here in the US. It changed my life. Because of that, it will always hold a special meaning for me.

Such accounts indicate that it is not simply the places themselves that are significant, but rather what can be called ‘‘experience-in-place’’ that creates meaning. Thus, while initial data analysis attempted to develop classification of types of physical places, it became apparent that such a strategy was inadequate and a more complex organization of people’s experience-in-place was needed. Like Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world, experience-in-place takes as the fundamental unit of analysis both the physical location and the nature of the experience, recognizing that each is inextricably bound to the other. Hence, findings are reported according to significant experiences in places rather than simple descriptions of the physical settings themselves. From participants’ stories of place experiences the following themes emerged: significant places reflect people’s evolving identity; provide opportunities for privacy, introspection and reflection; serve as transitional markers as well as bridges to the past; and reflect the salience of safety, threat and belonging which are fundamentally connected to socially constructed identities, thus reflecting the political underpinnings of our relationships to places (see Table 3). Following a brief discussion of the range of feelings about places which participants found meaningful, each of these themes will be explored below.

Table 3
Significant themes in relationships to place

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<th>Experience in place (general)</th>
<th>Evolving identity</th>
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<td>Privacy, introspection and self-reflection</td>
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<td>Bridges to the past</td>
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<td>Process of developing meaning</td>
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3.2. The range of feelings toward places

Throughout the interviews, participants described a broad range of feelings about places. In the more extreme range, many participants described deep love for some places (55%), others described fear, dread or even hatred of places (33%). Notably, most participants (93%) described feeling ambivalent about at least one of the places they identified as particularly meaningful in their life, suggesting that ambivalence might be more the rule than the exception. Participants also discussed places in less dramatic terms. While these places were described as ‘‘important’’ and ‘‘meaningful,’’ they were characterized in less emphatic ways that reflect what Chawla (1992) calls ‘‘affectionate identification.’’ This is evident in such comments as, ‘‘I come here regularly. I really like it; it is a nice place to be.’’

All participants enthusiastically described positive feelings about some place outside of their residence. For example, one participant was quite attached to her local laundromat:

I love laundromats! I love their smell. I adore going to mine because I enjoy doing the laundry. It is something I can accomplish; I have something to do and I am surrounded by people I know and we are all doing the same thing. I like to create a home sort of feeling for myself, and the laundromat is a place where I have figured out how to do that.

A year ago, this participant moved to another apartment that was much further from this laundromat, but she still took her clothing to her regular laundromat: ‘‘There are a million laundromats in between, but I
I like it better, I feel comfortable there.”

Two participants described such strong feelings toward a particular place that they wanted their ashes scattered there when they died: one woman wanted her ashes scattered on the dunes of an island off the coast of Maine where she spent her summers as a child, the other wanted her ashes scattered in various locations throughout the town where she lived as a youth. The latter example illustrates the significance of a multitude of geographically scattered places that together form a web of meaning in people’s lives.

When describing particularly strong, positive relationships to places, some participants used anthropomorphic terms. For example, one man, who was an avid basketball player, described a particular court this way: “The basketball court is like a friend to me. I can go there alone; there doesn’t have to be anyone there. I talk to it, and carry on conversations with it. It helps to clear my head...and think things through.” One woman described her childhood home in a similar manner: “Somehow the house is like a parent. It has this authoritarian, backbone kind of existence for me. It is also like a friend.” Another participant talked about her rather strong feelings about her health club:

That is my womb. It is a very special place to me, because it took me many, many years to get to a point in my life where I did something soothing and nurturing for myself. And I first began to do that at my health club. It was the reason I decided to join. And I continue to go so that I may take care of myself—on a number of levels. Which is a big step for me.

Conversely, most participants (72%) also talked about some negative feelings and experiences in some place that they considered significant. Often, these were places where they experienced interpersonal conflict. These negative experiences, and the places where they occurred, had a powerful impact on people. For example, one man told the following story about a place where he had worked:

I hated this place! It was a horrible place to be because of the other people there. But I grew to hate the sight of that building too. I was honestly making myself physically sick so I would not have to go there. And I quit every day, but I was under contract, so legally I had to go in. Even if I walk on that street now, I don’t like to walk on that side of the street, because it brings back horrible memories, which is a terrible, terrible feeling.

As mentioned above, ambivalent feelings toward places were quite common. This is illustrated in one man’s feelings about the town where he grew up:

There were great things that happened there, developing myself, exploring who I am. But I saw certain things there that were not handled well, and that made it sometimes difficult. It was a place where all the little lies and half-truths were harbored. So basically, I didn’t like the town and what it represented to me. It reminds me of the ‘place’ I was in before I broadened my horizons. I felt closed in there and misunderstood. So I have mixed feelings about it, really.

One woman described ambivalent feelings about her church:

For a long time I loved my church—the idea and the building. It has given me real feelings of comfort and familiarity. I like the rituals and I am somewhat religious anyway. But I had a bad crisis of faith at one point, when my father died. And I developed this anger and resentment toward the church and I stopped going there. Things have subsided, but they are not quite the same either.

Clearly, feelings about places cannot be divorced from one’s experiences of them. Each significant place that participants described was accompanied by a story of meaningful life experiences that, while not always out of the ordinary, struck a chord in the psyche of participants’ minds. Their stories show that it is the experience-in-place, rather than the places themselves that are meaningful. The remaining data are therefore reported in terms of the significant experiential themes that emerged in participant interviews, namely how significant places reflect people’s evolving identity, serve as markers in life’s journey, act as bridges to the past, and reflect critical dynamics among safety, threat and belonging mediated largely by socially constructed identities.

3.3. Relationships to place reflect evolving identity

Participants felt it was very important to have places where they could be themselves and explore who they are. Analysis of the data indicates that certain experiences made places salient, particularly the processes of reflection, introspection, self-understanding and personal growth, which may be seen as identity issues. Participants’ stories suggest that their relationships to places are a way of working out their identity in the world. Many respondents (39%) talked explicitly about how a particular place “made them who they are” and how their understanding of themselves changed through their relationship with that place. As one woman explained, “Most places that are important to me played a role in who I am as a person. Each of them was a stepping stone to where I am today.” Another
participant talked about her parents’ house as a defining part of her life:

It is the most important place for me really. It is a part of me, a part of my being. It defines who I am as a person. As well as being a place to live, it is also me. I feel that when people come to the house and see it, they can understand me more. … The house is just so much me that I sometimes don’t think of it as a place.

Another participant described how outings on his family’s boat as youth dramatically affected his sense of self:

When I was growing up, my family had a boat and we spent a lot of time on the water. That is an important place to me. I associate some of my best times with being there. It was a place where I could be myself, where I was in my element more than any other place. It was a place where I felt the most confident and secure. There was something about the whole way of life on the boat that I took to. It was more than just an activity, it was a defining part of my life.

Not only do many places contribute to one’s sense of self over time, but also several places can simultaneously contribute to one’s identity. For example, one respondent went to a particular neighborhood to attend a church which she felt fostered her spirituality; she also frequented another neighborhood for its gay bars, and spent time in Central Park to have contact with nature and remind herself of a childhood spent in the country. This is not to say that people expressed only one aspect of themselves in a given place. Our understanding of ourselves, and our sense of how the world views us, are not that easily compartmentalized. Rather, many places together form a “web of meaning,” and complete the gestalt of who we are.

3.3.1. Privacy, introspection and reflection

Findings suggest that certain places become meaningful specifically because they afford people the opportunity for privacy, introspection and self-reflection. More than half (60%) of participants went to places outside of their residence to seek privacy to think and reflect on life. Of these, most (58%) sought out natural settings. These locations enabled participants to become “lost in thought” and to reflect on their problems. For example, one man explained that the park in his old neighborhood provided him with this opportunity:

A lot of the appeal of the park is that I could really sit and think about who I was and what I was doing and what my direction was. Self-evaluation type things. I really have not had a good self-evaluative experience in the last few years, so I feel an urge to go to those places lately and to relive the sense of peace and relaxation and comfort with myself that I associate with those places.

However, not all participants felt that nature was an essential element of the physical environment to foster such experiences. One participant, an avid photographer, used a community darkroom at his local YMCA to think in solitude:

I go into the darkroom, and when I am there, I don’t feel like I have to worry about my problems anymore. I process my photographs as I process my thoughts. I find myself in another world. And when I am done, I feel refreshed and stronger.

In some cases (35%), participants described the importance of movement or traveling as a way of thinking and reflecting. They described walks through a favorite neighborhood, or riding on a bus to watch the passing scenery out of the windows. These respondents felt it was necessary to be in motion themselves in order to inspire their “mental wheels” to turn. These kinds of activities allowed participants to be alone while observing their surroundings. One man claimed that he preferred the process of traveling for a sense of solitude:

I don’t really have stationary places as destinations in mind when I seek solitude. I like the trip itself. I especially like bus trips. It is a way of being alone, even though I am not literally alone. I have my own things around me, I have my books. And I am seeing things go by, neighborhoods pass behind the glass. I find I am very reflective when I take these rides.

These results confirm the importance of natural places for solitude, yet they reveal that a variety of settings and experiences support privacy and introspection. For some, important places provide opportunities for reflection through solitude. For others, important places offered the stimulation they desired to facilitate a reflective process—the changing scenery of a bus ride, or quiet jazz in a café. The importance of introspection and reflection reinforce the notion that significant experiences in places are those that reflect one’s personal journey in the world.

3.3.2. Places as markers in life’s journey

Many participants (43%) described how important places were those in which events occurred that marked their particular life journey in new or unique ways. This seemed to happen in two general ways: (1) significant experiences or what I call “milestone moments;” or (2) experiences of change and transition. These two types of experiences are not mutually exclusive, but milestone moments are not always about change; they include moments of realization, clarification of goals, a first experience with sex, while the latter include events such...
as a fight with a lover that ended their relationship, or flight from an abusive household. While some of the stories recounted here are negative experiences, they were all considered growth experiences by participants. Typically, these experiences indicate a personal turning point. For better or worse, they were events that helped move people’s life journey forward. Hence, places in which these events occurred served as markers in their journey and become significant because of that.

For many participants, places that served as markers in life’s journey were significant even if the experience in that place was less than ideal. This underscores that both positive and negative feelings and experiences lead to meaningful personal growth and to the development of relationships to the places that foster such growth. For example, one participant remembered her experiences in her first house after she had a near-fatal car accident. It was an isolated country house and she described considerable difficulty managing her daily life there after the accident. The difficulties proved too much, and she sold the house. Nonetheless, she saw it as an important growth experience. For this participant, this negative experience marked her courage and the sacrifice she had to make to survive:

It was really hard letting that place go. I loved it, but I knew what I had to do, and that I could get a place like that again eventually, if I kept focused and tried. Now I have a goal to get back to that again. And when I think of what I went through down there all alone, I am really proud of myself for managing through it all. It was then that I realized I was really capable of running my own life.

This woman initially valued the cabin for its solitude, and the fact that it was her own, but the accident transformed the meaning of the solitude, making it a hardship. Yet the loss of the cabin allowed her to discover new dimensions and qualities within herself, and to provide a future goal in her life.

In some cases, places served as transitional markers in the way that they captured critical, milestone moments in people’s relationships to significant others. For example, one participant talked about a place within his local park that was meaningful to him, particularly because of a pivotal moment he experienced there:

There is one place within the park where my girlfriend and I had sort of a final confrontation. This was a place that we went to three or four times a week because it was part of our regular route through the park. That day, it was a real scene. There were very strong emotions. We were screaming, shouting, crying. Yelling back and forth for quite a while. It was a very cathartic experience. It was then that we knew we had to move on. Sometimes I think we were just scared kids who moved to the city together and were just to afraid to let go. But our time had passed. When I think of this place, I remember that moment.

These cases underscore the significance of others in our experiences of place. Participants’ stories clearly indicate a place can become meaningful for the social opportunities one finds there, or because it represents a turning point in a relationship. Findings also suggest that other people help to create space—literally and metaphorically—in people’s lives. Relationships open doors to new places on both physical and emotional levels. In this way, we can see how interpersonal relationships impact place meaning as well as personal development.

For some participants, places developed meaning as symbols of change, in both their sense of self and their life overall. This seems to be particularly true for those who struggled with trauma, neglect or bigotry. For them, places interacted with their life journey in particularly complex ways. Many of their significant places are locations that helped them capture a shift in their lives, either in terms of their life circumstances or self-concept. For example, one man who was abused as a child, described feeling very attached to the truck stops along the route from New York to Florida. These were important symbols of distance from a painful life:

When I was a kid, my father and I would drive down to Miami to see my grandparents a few times a year. And for me, when we would get to a certain spot on the road, that signified being free, being far away from home. It was a truck stop near Richmond, Virginia. To this day, it is there on I-95. I am very fond of that diner. It is a symbol of distance for me. We always went there when I was a kid, and now, when my wife and I go to Florida, we have to stop there. That is a very important landmark for me.

For this man, this place was a symbol of change and freedom, an escape from a deeply unhappy life. Because he was not abused on these trips, this place represented a reprieve.

Similarly, another participant talked about the first place where she lived with her mother and sisters when they escaped her abusive father:

This was the biggest thing—adjusting to a non-abusive household. Because my father used to abuse us, we had to learn that it was okay to be able to sleep at night and know that he wasn’t going to burst in and hit one of us. It was different knowing that you could sleep through the night not hearing either my mother scream or one of us being hauled out of bed for whatever reason it happened to be.

For this woman, the new house represented hope and the possibility of a different, happier life. It stood in her mind as a catalyst for growth and change as she adjusted
to a living in a nonviolent household that she need not dread.

3.4. Places as bridges to the past

People’s experiences of places remain with them over time, either through memories of places from their past, or through repeated use of the same places over time. Both past places and past experiences in currently used places were integral components of the equation of

people, places, experiences and feelings that made up participants’ lives. It is through places that people can make connections between a whole collection of feelings and experiences in the present and the past. In some cases, places enabled the memory of people and events to emerge; in other cases, the memories of people and events enable places to emerge as significant.

Further, past experiences with currently used places enable people to make comparisons between where they once were, and where they are now, literally and in their personal development. The disparity was sometimes encouraging for people, because it showed them how they have grown and changed. Sometimes, it was discouraging, reminding people of things lost or not achieved, of painful experiences. In these cases, past places and experiences showed people where and what they did not want to be.

Certain experiences made place memorable. For some participants, places that acted as bridges to the past, that provide continuity in people’s lives, are important. In these cases, new places provide linkages to past places, events and people by building emotional and psychological “bridges” which helped create and maintain a sense of continuity and wholeness in people’s lives. For example, one participant explained that she now loved to shop at one particular department store because it reminded her of shopping trips with her mother as a little girl in Los Angeles. The respondent’s mother passed away when she was young, making her memories of these shopping trips particularly important:

I will always remember walking through Bullocks-Wilshire with my mother as a girl. It was a department store in downtown Los Angeles, where I grew up. I went with her all the time, and I think of it so often. It was our special little time. We would look at the clothes and then go out for ice cream.

Now as an adult living in New York she felt she recaptured that memory shopping at a similar department store:

Anytime I go there I get those same feelings. It reminds me of growing up and being with her. It connects me back to that time. And I think of it a lot now, because she died when she was 33, about the same age as I am now. I think about what she was like then and how it would be nice to be with her. We had such a good time. She would like this store.

Not all places that were meaningful provided connections to people’s past. As we have seen in the previous section, some places gain significance because they mark a separation from an unhappy past. In such cases, continuity was not preferable, and new places that marked change became particularly important, if only for the contrast they provided to a painful past.

3.5. The dynamics of safety, threat and belonging

An important part of participants’ relationships to places stemmed from issues regarding safety and threat. Here, we see how identity influences one’s sense of safety and the places where one finds safety. In particular, participants from socially marginalized groups, i.e. people of color, women, gays, and in one case, an ex-con, told powerful stories about places in which experiences of safety and threat had a critical impact on their relationships to places, and their sense of self. All of these participants (30%) commented that safety was an essential part of those places they considered significant, since feeling accepted and free to be themselves was more of a struggle for them. In fact, the participant who spent time in prison was the only straight, white male participant who spoke explicitly of safety as an important ingredient in meaningful places.

Many people of color interviewed described feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in places because of their race. For example, one African–American woman discussed how being black influenced her relationships to places. She described visiting extended family in Mississippi as a teenager in the late 1970s:

I remember being there when I was 15, feeling like I had the freedom to go around and do whatever I wanted, so I wasn’t paying attention to the little things. I remember we were driving down this road and there was this white man with a rifle on his shoulder walking, and I just turned around to see what he was doing, and whoever was in the car said to me sternly, ‘Turn around!’ And there I was demanding, ‘Why can’t I look at him?’ And I raised a fuss. The person in the car was young too, but he knew more than I did, and he knew there was a possibility that this man might shoot. And I am Miss I-Can-Look-At-Whoever-I-Want-to-Look-At. When I think about it now, I know it was not the hot spot for blacks to travel through back then.

Women also discussed places in terms of safety. Women generally did not feel safe on the streets, nor did they feel comfortable going alone to many public places, particularly bars. Women did use and enjoy bars, but in contrast to male participants, they did not go to them to
be alone. One participant talked about going to the movie theater alone, but she stopped going because of safety concerns:

I used to like going to the movies alone, to relax and just get lost in the film. And there was one theatre on the west side that I used to go to all the time. But I don’t like going there by myself any more. I went there one night and there was a strange man in there, making strange comments and the people working there just didn’t seem to care. So I stopped going there. It no longer felt like a safe place. It is a shame.

Another female participant who lived alone echoed similar concerns when she was apartment hunting. Here, we can see that safety concerns can place considerable restrictions on the use of space and where one chooses to live:

Place is important in terms of safety to me, especially as a woman living alone in the city. I don’t feel safe on the same block or places that other people would feel safe on. When I went apartment hunting, there were neighborhoods and situations that were just out of the question for me. Places were economically reasonable, but completely unsafe.

Many gay and lesbian participants who described feeling comfortable in certain places, and entirely unsafe in others, also shared concerns over safety. Gay participants explained that they were careful about where they went and how they behaved. For example, one gay man described feeling “edgy” about the restaurant/bar where he worked as a waiter:

This is my biggest fear working here this summer: Some of these businessmen come here on a Friday night to unload. They get drunk, they are whooping it up, and one day one of them might notice me flitting around here, singing in a falsetto voice, and they are going to come over and bash a beer bottle over my head.

As we can see from these experiences, participants’ race, gender and sexuality influenced their experiences of places and created different potentials and restrictions on their use and enjoyment of space, thereby influencing their ability to be themselves. In this way, identity, and the socio-political underpinnings of it, makes a critical difference in how we use and view place.

Conversely, other significant places foster a sense of belonging. All participants described at least one place that was important to them because it provided a sense of belonging—buts what is particularly noteworthy is that this sense of belonging is based on ones social identity. For example, one African-American woman who lived in Harlem enjoyed her neighborhood and the sense of community she found there:

It is very rich in cultural elements. I feel good there, like I have a connection. I like Malcolm X Boulevard and 125th Street. It is the heart of black Harlem. There is a restaurant I like to go to and eat soul food. There is the greatest energy there. Having grown up in a black community, I can feel a certain at-homeness there. It is a nice feeling.

Findings clearly indicate that people develop connections to places through their social experiences and connections to others in those places. The effect of other people on one’s experience of a place was considerable. It was particularly important for participants to find places for “my kind of people.” And for those in socially marginalized groups, it seems that finding a sense of belonging might be more salient when other groups are not so accepting of them.

3.6. Experiences in the residence

While the results of this study have been primarily organized around experience-in-place, because of the predominant focus on the residence in the literature, questions were explicitly asked about participants’ experiences of their residence—both past and current—in order to determine just what experiences and meanings this place held for people. Yet even while the focus here is specifically on the residence, the data suggest that it serves as a microcosm of our experience-in-place, as rich descriptions reveal an intricate bond between experience and the place in which it occurs.

In contrast to popular beliefs about the nature and meaning of home, almost all participants (90%) mentioned some negative aspect of either their current or a past residence. When asked specifically about their feelings about their current residence, some participants (23%) said they did not feel connected to their residence at all. Others disliked their residence and said that they avoided spending time there (15%). When discussing previous residences, a full 25% of participants described some past residence as a painful place, and their relationship to it reflected struggles for self-affirmation and a sense of belonging that eluded them there. For participants whose residence was a painful place, places outside the residence became very important, particularly if they symbolized distance from that place.

3.6.1. Disconnection from the residence

A number of participants (23%) spontaneously talked about how their residence was not a place where they felt comfortable and free to be themselves. For example, one man explained, “I live in Brooklyn, but I spend most of my time in downtown Manhattan. It is where I find people who are more like me. I just sleep in my apartment.” Another participant described the place...
where he grew up with a similar detachment:

The town itself isn’t really home that much. It doesn’t hold as much as you might think a hometown would—or should. After I went away to school, that is when I began to reassess certain values I had when I was growing up and re-examining the whole middle class suburban lifestyle. That was when I realized I didn’t have a particular attachment to my hometown—or to the house. I hear other people talking about their hometown like it was their mother incarnate. I felt badly for a while that I didn’t feel that way about the place where I had grown up but it was clear to me that I had no real attachment to the place. It wasn’t that my feelings changed, I just became more aware of my feelings.

Some participants (25%) described negative experiences in either a past or current residence, and therefore made a conscious decision to disconnect from that place. One participant explained that her family’s house brought up unpleasant feelings because her parents had recently divorced, and her mother no longer lived there. Consequently, she felt it was “no longer really like home.” Another participant described her parents’ residence as a significant, but negative place that shaped her life dramatically:

I come from a family that is dysfunctional, so my parents’ house—I have very mixed feelings about. It is probably an awful thing to say, but it is true. Both of my parents are alcoholics. There have been some pretty horrendous scenes there. It got so bad that a few years ago I vowed I would never go back.

Another participant expressed some puzzlement at not having fond attachments to the house in which she grew up. When she began talking about places that were important and meaningful to her, she said:

You would think that the house in which I was born and raised would be the most important place, but it is not. My parents recently moved out of that house and I thought it would really impact on me in a big way, but it has not. I am just not that attached to that house. I never really loved it.

This participant drew a connection between her disenchantment toward the house and the unhappy dynamics within it. She realized her house was not like others when she visited a friend’s house:

Their house was neater than ours, really nice. Really soothing. But actually, it’s that they were really relaxed people. Now that I am saying this…yes, their house was neater, but the fact that my house was messy didn’t bother me in and of itself. I think it was messy because of the constant fights between my parents.

3.6.2. Dynamics of our relationships to the residence

Findings indicate that peoples’ experience of their residence in childhood often influenced the way they viewed their current residence, illustrating the dynamism of relationships to place over the lifecourse. More specifically, experiences that thwarted people’s sense of comfort and emotional security in childhood were powerful lessons, for better or worse, of what to expect from their residence and the world around them. This, in turn, influenced how people viewed themselves. For example, one participant described feeling uncomfortable in her current apartment and regularly avoided it, spending time at her sister’s apartment instead. At the time of the interview, she was struggling to understand why her apartment made her so unhappy. At first, she noted that she was dissatisfied with the lack of space, but upon further reflection decided that there was “something more to it that I want to understand.” After thinking about it a while, she felt that she was “so accustomed to trying to escape an unhappy home life” that she did not know how to create a satisfactory living space although she lived on her own, in a place of her choosing.

Some participants had negative experiences in their childhood residences that served to create difficulties for them in finding self-affirming places in their adult lives. For example, the man who was abused as a child described how he regularly barricaded himself in his bedroom by pulling the furniture against the door to prevent his father from hitting him. His experience of home was one of pain and fear:

It was really rough and really painful. Childhood was just a very, very agonizing and deeply painful experience….If there is some possible way, and I manage this sometimes for months at a time, I try not to have any reminder of my childhood at all. I try to keep things shut out. So I avoid going to the places that are associated with my childhood.

This participant also moved quite often in childhood, as his parents would regularly go off and search for a new place, “thinking it would fix the problems.” Consequently, he was overwhelmed by the unpredictable and often dramatic changes in his life that such moves brought. This greatly influenced the way he related to places in his life:

It got overwhelming after a while. Virtually every weekend of my childhood that I can recall we went house hunting. I remember when we moved to one house, the second week after we moved in there, they started looking at other houses again.

He explained how difficult such instability was: “the trauma of the moves override my memories of the places. In one place, my father had to drag me out kicking and screaming and crying.” At the time of the
interview, this man had been living in the same, cramped apartment with his wife for years. He admitted that the apartment was inadequate, and that his wife desperately wanted to move out. Yet, he could not entertain the thought of moving:

I live in a tiny apartment that I know my wife hates. But I am not going to move. There has to be some really great reason for us to move, like getting a job in another country or winning the lottery. Even if I won the lottery, I don’t think that would be reason unto itself to move.

While it could be argued that his was an extreme case, this participant was not alone in either his experience of abuse or of moving frequently as a child. His experience led him to rigidly cling to a residence that his wife, at least, considered inadequate. This reflects what Rubinstein (1993) considers “place bondage” or an unhealthy connection to a place from which it is difficult to extricate oneself. While this is not a typical childhood, it provides important lessons about the dynamics behind our relationships to places and the “shadow side” (Chawla, 1993) of such relationships.

In some cases, respondents essentially disliked a past or current residence, but still valued it for the experiences gained and the lessons taught there. For example, one woman described a former residence that she disliked, and in fact feared, as important because it clarified what she did not want out of life for herself:

It was a really horrible time; I had been in a really severe auto accident and was in a lot of physical pain, I couldn’t hold down a job… As my financial situation deteriorated, I moved to less and less desirable places, until finally I was living in the worst ghetto I have ever lived in…. There were crack houses all on this street. It was a war zone. I lived in the front of the house, and whenever I went into my room at night I would shut the lights out and crouch down because they were dealing drugs right in front of the house, and I didn’t want to get hit by a stray shot. So I would literally stay below the level of the window all the time at night.

This participant said she wanted to remember that place because it signified a “real low” in her life that she wanted to avoid in the future:

That place became my yardstick. It was a new low and after a time I knew I had to get out of there and pull myself together if I didn’t want to live like this forever. I know I will do what I can to have some quality of life better than that. I never want to live like that again.

These descriptions serve to remind us that places develop meaning through more than positive feelings and experiences. Rather, both negative and positive experiences contribute to place meaning.

3.7. The process of developing meaning

The findings of this research as a whole reveal important data about the process of developing meaning around place. It is evident, for example, that many places become meaningful through the steady accretion of experiences in them, such as Tuan (1974) hypothesized years ago. Repeated use of places enables participants to engage in a variety of experiences in places. This added many facets and layers of meaning to those places, as people “collected” experiences in them. People developed multi-faceted relationships with places that sometimes transcended physical boundaries and coalesced around personal, emotional experiences. For example, one participant focused her discussions on a local park about which she told some of her most detailed stories. She met her husband there, and years later, they decided to separate there. This was also the same park where she played as a child, and where she took her children to play. This park was a significant place whose meaning developed from both positive and negative experiences. Thus, repeated use of, and varied experiences in, places added layers of meaning to places.

However, in some cases, places developed meaning because of one significant experience—a pivotal or flashpoint moment—in that place—this includes the milestone moments discussed earlier. Such experiences were indicated by comments like—“it was a defining part of my life.” In another example, one respondent remembers a place where he said goodbye to his friend of many years:

There is this one place in Colorado that is special. Whenever I think of that place, I will always remember this one afternoon when this person was moving far away. We were packing up her stuff into her car, and while we were packing—this was June—it started to snow. It was one of these freak storms. We finished packing her stuff and she drove off in the snow. It wasn’t the last time I saw her, but it was really the last time that was really our time, when we were really still special to each other.

In these cases, the individual experience is so significant, that the place in which the experience occurred gains its own meaning.

4. Discussion

A host of experiences, both positive and negative, dramatic and mundane, occur in a variety of places and constitute our lifeworld. The experiences which people find important and meaningful often lead to significant
bonds with the places in which these experiences occur—for better or worse. However, it is not merely that places are containers for these significant experiences. Complex relationships to these places develop on their own merit as experience and place become intertwined. The complexity of these relationships lies in the diversity of places and experiences that contribute to place meaning. At the same time, the places which people found meaningful were not extraordinary. They were not of award-winning design or fame. Rather, they were ordinary places that are “routine, experienced in everyday life” (Riley, 1992, p. 13). Yet, based on participants’ feelings and experiences, these places are anything but mundane. People talked about bathrooms, laundromats, bars, and abandoned factories in ways that suggest there is much more to those places than meets the eye. That these places can heal, provide nurturance, and opportunities for emotional development and self-understanding is evident in the stories presented in this research.

Looking across participants’ stories described in the results, we can see that important and meaningful places were widely varied. Some were outdoors (beaches, parks, a lake); other were indoors (churches, bars, laundromats and airports). Some were tiny niches (a closet, a hallway in a grandmother’s apartment, or the landing at the top of a staircase)—in these intimate places came feelings of enclosure, safety, warmth and imagination. Other meaningful places were on a larger scale, such as entire cities (Budapest, San Francisco) or nations (Scotland, Hungary, Russia). Experiences in these places tended to expand people’s worldview and provided more outward experiences of discovery and learning—for better or worse. Here too we see the lifeworld composed of movement and rest (Seamon, 1979). Some meaningful places were places from the past, which no longer existed or were no longer accessible, while others still existed and were actively used. These emphasize the importance of time and continuity.

The findings from this research expand upon important findings in the literature on place attachment, meaning and identity. For example, participants’ stories reflect the “underlying dimensions” of place meaning posited by Gustafson (2001b)—distinction, valuation, continuity and change. Similarly, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell’s (1996) “principles of identity”—distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy are also supported by these data. However, the results of the study presented here offer some clarification and differences from these two frameworks. For example, while Gustafson’s treatment of distinction puts the focus on the distinction of places from each other, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell seem to focus more on the distinctiveness of the self from others, likely because their particular focus is on place and identity processes. Nonetheless, the findings of this research suggest that both types of distinction are at work in our relationships to place. Further comparisons with these two frameworks are made in more detail below. What is important to note here is that in addition to providing support for these two studies, the results presented in this paper illuminate other dimensions of our relationships to place, particularly the role of negative and ambivalent experiences and place meanings, the socio-political dimensions of our relationships to places, and experiences that lie outside of our traditional notions of “home.”

4.1. Identity and place

Relationships to places reflect people’s psychological landscapes, their personal issues and their particular journey in the world (Jager, 1974). Because of this, people develop relationships to a wide variety of places, the combination of which reflect people’s particular way of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1971). The places that people deemed important enabled them to sort out their thoughts and feelings, to work out their identity, to dream and to grow. In this way, relationships to places represent people’s ever-evolving identity and self-awareness because they provide opportunities for self-development (Korpela, 1989; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996; Hay, 1998; Gustafson, 2001b). These findings support Twigger-Ross and Uzzell’s (1996) framework for the complex dynamics between place and identity, particularly the ways in which self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness, continuity influence people’s interactions with the environment. For example, participants’ stories about significant places serving as bridges to the past support the notion of continuity over the lifepath posited by both Gustafson (2001b) and Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996).

Findings reveal that discontinuity is also important. This is evident in accounts such as a flight from abuse or disconnection from a childhood home. As Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) point out, not only do people choose environments that are congruent with their self-concept, they also move on (physically or psychically) to find places that are more congruent with their sense of self. The latter is what they call a “conscious discontinuity,” or a separation from previous environments and a movement toward new environments to mark a new stage in life or emerging identity (see also Fried, 2000). This suggests the utility of thinking about continuity—discontinuity as a continuum or dialectic giving equal weight and recognition to the need or desire for separation, on either a conscious or an unconscious level.

Findings reveal that there are other qualities to the dynamics between identity and place that warrant further attention, in particular the ways that our socially
constructed identities influence our relationships to place—that is, the findings suggest the political nature of the intersection of place and identity. In particular, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity create different potentials and restrictions on the use and enjoyment of space, thereby influencing people’s ability to be themselves. Thus, these dimensions of identity go beyond individual characteristics; they are part of a larger socio-political reality that affects the way people are treated and how they experience the world around them (Keith & Pile, 1993). These findings are commensurate with the literature on racial and ethnic differences in views of wildlands and outdoor recreation settings (Johnson & Bowker, 2004), as well as in the urban theory and political geography literature (Keith & Pile, 1993; Cresswell, 1996).

Interestingly, the qualities of the places where people feel threatened or excluded—Relph’s sense of outsidership perhaps—were public places where presumably anyone has access, but where social boundaries have been created. For example, neighborhoods and other geographic boundaries are often drawn along racial lines. Those who overstep racial and ethnic boundaries often suffer consequences through harassment and violence. This is certainly reflected in the findings (e.g. the African–American participant’s story of Mississippi, or gay participants discussions of sports bars). Consequently, people carved out their own niches and spaces to belong, where they could feel a sense of belonging or insideness (e.g. African–American art galleries or gay bars). As we have seen, the dynamics of exclusion and creating spaces of belonging have a powerful effect on people’s emotional relationships to places.

4.2. Dynamics of people–place relationships

Relationships to places are a life-long phenomenon. They develop and transform over time, so that past experiences in places influence our current relationships to places. In this regard, findings support Gustafson’s (2001b) argument about the temporal dimension of place meaning (i.e. place meaning through the “life-path”). This is evident in the findings particularly regarding people’s relationships to their residence. This relationship is very much influenced by the nature of participants’ relationships with previous residences and with other places currently in their lives. This research provides further empirical evidence to support Cooper Marcus’ (1995) argument that some adults reproduce special places of childhood in their current residence, while others replay unresolved childhood conflicts. As she notes, we “unconsciously place ourselves in conflictual environments that enable us to work out unresolved emotional connections” (p. 106). This indicates that the relationship to the residence is one piece of a larger puzzle in which an array of meaningful places creates a larger web of meaning in one’s life. It is not surprising, then, that when the residence is a source of negative experiences, people turn to other places for more positive experiences.

In this research, there is evidence of the importance of home as well as journey, stability as well as change, positive as well as negative experiences, thus reinforcing the conceptualizations of place experience as a dialectical process postulated by Relph (1976) and Casey (1993). For some, the metaphor of home aptly fits their experience of connection, stability and belonging. For others, the metaphor of journeying may be more useful. Here, the concept of journeying reflects a developmental process or personal evolution through time and space as people interact with the world around them. As this research demonstrates, people’s stories about significant places in their lives describe their particular journey in the world, as important and meaningful places can act as symbolic milestones in their life journey. Viewing relationships to places as a reflection of our journey in the world also enables us to see how feelings of comfort, belonging and self-affirmation can transcend physical boundaries of the residence and be found in a variety of settings. In an increasingly globalized world, this particular understanding of place meaning may be more illustrative than more traditional notions of home. Finally, the notion of journeying necessarily involves the larger context, i.e., the socio-political world in which we live. Hence, the journey is not merely an internal, individual progression, but a progression influenced by external forces, such as the socio-cultural and political context in which place meaning develops.

4.3. Creative use of space

Findings indicate that there is a fluid boundary, if any boundary at all, between the public and the private in terms of meaning and use of space. For example, people sought out public locations such as parks, bookstores and cafes to become lost in their thoughts and to reflect on their problems and interpersonal relationships and have what most consider very private moments. For example, participants did this by losing themselves among a crowd on bustling city streets to sort out life problems, and they ended romances in public settings. The former experiences support Westin’s (1967) original view of privacy as including anonymity—being alone in a crowd, while the latter experience reflects Lauffer & Wolfe’s (1977) argument that concepts and patterns of privacy do not always require physical solitude or shutting the world out by remaining at home. But these choices about what to do where are often made consciously and deliberately. This affirms Altman’s
(1975) classic definition of privacy as a dialectical boundary-control process, which includes both an opening and a closing of the self to others. The finding that people use places in a variety of ways, sometimes in a manner other than what the designers have intended, speaks to the creative ways people use places to suit their needs. It also reminds us that people are active shapers of their environments. The active and creative use of space demonstrated by respondents in this research provides further evidence for Frederickson & Anderson’s (1999) argument that people–place relationships are bi-directional and dynamic, although their focus was on nature. It was through the uses of places, however typical or creative, that places became important to people. The personally adopted use of places is an important part of each individual’s journey in the world, part of a fundamental life process that transpires as we interact with the world around us. Hence, important experiences, or what can be called “markers” in the journey, are not restricted to any particular place, nor to any particular emotion or experience.

4.4. Home as spatial metaphor

The popularity of the use of spatial metaphors has been well-documented (Smith & Katz, 1993). They are helpful in articulating our conceptions of ourselves, other people and the world around us. However, as this research demonstrates, not all spatial metaphors are useful in all cases. As we have seen, defining an experience, or a feeling of comfort, relaxation and self-affirmation as “being at home” can be problematic. Moreover, participants’ stories about the places in their lives provide testimony that a simple, broad-based distinction between residential and nonresidential places is neither sufficient nor accurate. While for some feeling “at home” is a useful way to characterize places where they could be themselves, or feel they belong, this was not always the case. Findings reveal that the notion of “home” was sometimes neither a sufficient nor accurate concept on which to base an understanding of emotional relationships to places. As one participant commented: “Being at home is a relative concept. If you didn’t have a happy childhood and someone says ‘make yourself at home’ does that mean I should beat the hell out of my children?” Clearly, the use of this spatial metaphor requires further analysis. The experiences described in this research reinforce the value of early phenomenological conceptualizations of inside/outside (Relph 1976) as well as identity/difference (Dovey, 2002). For example, in the comment above we can see instead an experience of existential outsidership that is all the more painful in the context of a place that would more ideally be an intimate place of belonging (Seamon, 1996).

4.5. The importance of loss and negative experiences

Participants’ discussions about meaningful places in their lives made it clear that identity develops from more than self-affirming experiences. That is, people’s ever-changing sense of self was influenced by difficult, sometimes unpleasant experiences in places (Fried, 1963). In some cases, people avoided places that reminded them of aspects of themselves that they would rather forget, or which were reminders of painful experiences. In other cases, people chose not to go to places where they felt unable to be themselves. Rather, they sought places where they could feel free to express themselves. This demonstrates how negative experiences can also be seen as growth experiences that helped shape people’s relationship to the world, and gave them an opportunity to learn about themselves and explore their identity.

People’s emotional relationships to the places embrace an array of places, feelings and experiences. Participants’ discussions of meaningful places stand as testimony of the power of the human struggle for understanding, love and dignity. In the end, by exploring people’s stories about place, we can learn a great deal about ourselves. As Nancy Mairs (1989) beckons in her book Remembering the bone house: “I invite you to the threshold of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own (p. 11).

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