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**“I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from”:  
The meaning of place in social work with children and families**

## **Introduction**

Around the world social work is typically conceptualised as a ‘person-in-environment’ activity, based on an ecological understanding of the way that people’s behaviour and well-being is a product of interactions between their own characteristics and those of the people and environments around them (see, for example, Gray et al. 2012; Mizrah and Davis, 2008; Jack 1997a, 2000). However, whilst many practitioners and writers have promoted the benefits of community-oriented approaches to social work in the UK (e.g., Jones and Mayo, 1974, 1975; Popple, 1985; Smale et al, 1988; Henderson and Thomas, 1992; Craig et al, 2011; Gill and Jack, 2007), mainstream practice with children and families has invariably focused on individual behaviour and interpersonal relationships, with limited attention typically paid to the influence of environmental factors (see, for example, Jack and Stepney, 1995; Jack, 1997b).

The introduction of practice guidance for the assessment of children explicitly based on ecological theory in all parts of the UK in recent years might have been expected to rectify this situation (Department of Health et al, 2000; National Assembly for Wales and Home Office, 2001a; Scottish Government, 2008; Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2008). However, this does not appear to have been the case, with evaluations of social work assessments using the new ecological frameworks consistently highlighting the limited attention still paid to the influence of environmental factors (e.g., Horwath, 2002; Cleaver et al, 2004; Jack, 2010; Thomas and Holland, 2010). Unfortunately, this trend looks set to continue, in England at least, with the latest statutory guidance advising professionals making referrals to local authority children’s social care that they should include ‘any information they have on the child’s developmental needs and the capacity of the child’s parents or carers to meet those needs’ (HM Government, 2013, p. 15), without making any mention of the wider family and environmental factors that are also an essential part of the ‘holistic’ assessment framework. Furthermore, apart from one or two isolated examples, such as Ferguson’s (2011) focus on the spaces where child protection work is conducted, there is virtually no consideration in the social work literature, or in practice, of the *meanings of place* to children and adults, and its influences on their behaviour and well-being (Jack, 2010, 2012).

This tendency of social work to overlook the role that place play in human development is not true of other disciplines, many of which make it one of their central concerns. In the fields of human geography and environmental psychology, for example, terms such as 'place attachment', 'place identity', and 'sense of place' are used to capture different aspects of the often deep and enduring connections between people and their surroundings (Altman and Low, 1992; Lewicka, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Scannell and Gifford, 2010). In what follows, evidence from these and other sources is used to examine the links between place, identity and well-being. The implications of these findings for social work with children and families are then explored, using practice examples to highlight some of the consequences of a lack of 'place awareness', as well as ways in which better understanding and acknowledgement of the meanings of place to individuals, groups and communities can be used to promote their well-being.

### **Place, identity and well-being**

Ever since John Bowlby's seminal work on maternal care and mental health for the World Health Organization in the 1950s, the social work literature has rightly devoted a great deal of attention to the role that children's attachments to *people* play in their development (Bowlby, 1951). However, despite a growing body of evidence about the close links that also exist between people's well-being and their attachments to *places* (e.g., Chawla, 1992; Day and Midbjer, 2007; Green and White, 2007; Irwin et al, 2007; Proshansky and Fabian, 1987; Proshansky et al 1983; Rowles, 1980, 1983; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996), the literature which underpins social work with children and families almost completely ignores this important aspect of human development (Jack, 2010, 2012).

However, as already noted, other disciplines, including philosophy, theology, sociology, geography, environmental psychology and anthropology, not to mention countless poets, novelists, song-writers, playwrights and film-makers, have all explored the meaning of place in human existence. Cultural geographers, amongst others, remind us that human experience is *always* rooted in place (e.g., Entrikin, 1989, p. 41). This is illustrated, for example, by Philip Hensher, winner of the 2013 Ondaatje Prize for Sense of Place with his novel *Scenes from Early Life*, who wrote that, when he thinks of a novel he loves, 'often...it is not the plot that comes to mind, or even, sometimes, the characters, but the setting...when the novelist's eye falls on a particular stretch of earth, it can transform it for ever' (Hensher, 2013). Along similar lines, the theologian, Philip Sheldrake, has argued that there is '...a vital connection between place, memory and human identity', and that place has a 'determining influence on the way people behave, think, or organize their lives and relationships' (Sheldrake, 2001, pp. 43 & 45). And finally, the poet Simon Armitage, describing a walk as a modern-day troubadour along

the Pennine Way in 2010, which passed through the village in West Yorkshire where he grew up, wrote that his journey took him back to 'that part of the country which has such a strong claim on my identity, such an influence on my writing and such a pull on my life' (Armitage, 2012, p. 250).

### Personal Identity, Sense of Security and Belonging

From a young age children develop feelings about their surroundings, with specific attachments forming towards people *and places* that are consistently associated with a sense of security and other positive experiences. Whilst a child's parents (or other main carers) are the focus of their attachments to people in the early years, various aspects of the home are likely to provide the main source of their initial attachments to places. It is these attachments to significant people and places, often in intimate combination with one another, which provide the 'secure base' necessary for healthy development, including the young child's emerging sense of identity, security and belonging. As children grow older and eventually become adults, developing their cognitive abilities and exploring further afield as they do so, a wider circle of people and places - siblings and other relatives, friends, schools, the local neighbourhood, village, town, region and country - also become important for their sense of who they are, where they feel safe, and consider that they 'belong' (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Dunn, 1993; Hay, 1998; Hopkins, 2010; Scourfield et al, 2006; Valentine, 2004; Waite and Cook, 2011). Feelings of belonging tend to be strongest amongst teenagers who perceive that they are accepted within the neighbourhoods where they live, or are connected to their local area through ancestry (Lynch, 1977; McCreanor et al, 2006), with those not in education, employment or training, for example, significantly more likely to feel they are not part of their local community (Prince's Trust, 2010).

### The Enduring Importance of Attachments to Place

It might be assumed that the increased geographical mobility associated initially with industrialisation, but accelerated by the subsequent processes of modernisation and globalisation, has reduced the importance of place in our lives. However, if anything, the evidence actually points in the opposite direction. Part of the explanation for this apparently contradictory finding is provided by sociologists and social theorists who have noted that, in a world characterized by increasing uncertainty and risk, personal identities are in a constant process of *construction*, through day-to-day reflexive interactions between individuals and their environments, rather than being *assigned* to them by society according to largely immutable factors such as their gender, race, social class and educational background, as in the past (Giddens, 1990, 1991). So, even if the time individuals spend in any one place is shrinking (although this isn't true for everyone), personal identities and feelings of security and belonging are likely to be

*more* closely linked to the places where people were born and brought up or currently live than ever before (Entrikin, 1989).

This conclusion is supported by evidence from around the world, including studies carried out in different parts of the UK and Ireland in recent years. For example, Inglis and Donnelly (2011), who conducted research in Dublin, found that many of their respondents maintained a strong sense of identity with the village or county where they grew up, as well as demonstrating 'elective bonding' with the city (or part of the city) where they were living at the time of the research. Further evidence of the importance of place in the construction of personal identity, feelings of security and a sense of belonging is provided in a series of studies also carried out in Dublin. Residents in four new suburbs were found to identify strongly with the neighbourhood where they were living, with their place attachments evident in references to the local character and heritage of the area and their 'embeddedness' in local networks of support (Corcoran et al, 2003, 2005). Other studies, including one carried out in the suburbs of Manchester, have found similar evidence of the strength of elective bonding to the places where people have settled (Savage et al, 2005), whilst an earlier study in the east end of London reveals the extent to which local areas play a salient role in identity formation, rather than just providing a context for it (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996).

It is apparent, therefore, that place continues to play an important role in the development of personal identity, feelings of security and a sense of belonging in the modern world. Further evidence of this conclusion can be found in the persistence of widespread assumptions about connections between people and the places where they live (e.g., Newcastle and 'Geordies', Liverpool and 'Scousers'), with answers to questions such as 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' still likely to be closely related to 'Where I come from' and 'Where I live' (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Taylor, 2010).

### Connections between Place and Well-Being

There is a large body of evidence about the role that place plays in different aspects of human well-being, even after variations in individual characteristics and circumstances have been taken into account (e.g., Cummins et al, 2005; Gatrell et al, 2000; Joshi et al, 2000; Pevalin and Rose, 2003). In a recent review of the evidence from a health geography perspective, for example, Curtis (2010) identified three aspects of environments (material, social and symbolic) that have an impact on mental health. The first of these, the material or physical environment, can be experienced as more or less beneficial to health because of natural features, such as water, mountains, parkland and forest, or aspects of the built environment. For instance, in a study conducted in the Netherlands, DeVries and colleagues (2003) found that people living in areas with more extensive 'greenspace', including gardens and woodland, had better mental health. This trend was more marked for groups likely to be restricted to their local area, such as

those with lower educational qualifications, women working in the home and older people, a finding which has particular significance for social workers, who are likely to be working with people who are disproportionately dependent on their local neighbourhoods compared to the general population (Gill and Jack, 2007). Increased access to outdoor environments has also been shown, for example, to reduce feelings of anger and anxiety amongst adults (Pretty et al, 2005) and improve the concentration and self-discipline of children with conduct disorders (Taylor et al, 2001).

The *social environment* can also have a profound influence on mental well-being. For example, a UK-wide study found that people in lower socio-economic groups living in areas with high levels of friendship ties were at lower risk of mental health problems (Stafford et al, 2008), and other studies have highlighted the positive role of what are referred to as 'loose ties' between residents in creating a sense of belonging and security in local communities (Cattell et al, 2008). Further evidence of the importance of informal social relationships in local neighbourhoods is provided by a study carried out in a range of rural and urban settings in Fife, Scotland, which highlighted the importance of the 'weak ties' that 10-11 year-old children developed with members of their neighbourhoods through their independent use of the local environment, including their journeys to school and visits to favourite people and places. As a result, the children developed '...a visible presence, interacting and integrated into the everyday life of their local areas', with the weak ties developed 'generating feelings of belonging, security and practical as well as social support' (Ross, 2007, p. 388).

In general, the most significant neighbourhood characteristic correlated with variations in the health and well-being of parents and children is the nature of the social environment in the area where they live (Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995). For example, differences in rates of recorded child abuse and neglect have frequently been found to be associated with the levels of social integration and isolation which exist in different locations (e.g., Coulton et al, 1995; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1992; Vinson et al, 1996), whilst social fragmentation has also been shown to be associated with higher rates of crime and other incivilities, resulting in increased levels of fear and insecurity amongst residents in those areas (e.g., Sampson et al, 1997, 1999). However, because of the difficulties sometimes involved in identifying the separate contributions of the physical and social dimensions of environments to well-being, many studies have examined their combined effects. For example, in one UK-wide study, parents living in what were classified as 'poor parenting environments', on a range of physical and social measures, reported significantly worse physical and mental health than the general population. The study also found that the poorer the environment the greater the proportion of parents reporting high levels of stress and not coping satisfactorily in their parenting role (Ghate and Hazel, 2002).

Finally, and most importantly for the analysis presented in this paper, places also have *symbolic meanings* for individuals, groups and cultures, which have implications for their well-being. From special places like heritage sites and memorials, to more everyday places like the home, school and local neighbourhood, people of all ages symbolically 'invest' parts of themselves in their surroundings in ways that underpin or strengthen their sense of individual or collective identity and belonging (Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Hay, 1998). Displacement, especially when it is enforced, can therefore be harmful because it threatens the sense of self which has been constructed in relation to aspects of the local environment, typically resulting in problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Vandermark, 2007). For example, a small-scale study examining first-year undergraduates in England making the transition from home to university found that they displayed an abiding concern with loss of place which manifested itself in an erosion of their sense of belonging, attachment and continuity, undermining the capacity of their homes to symbolise the self (Chow and Healey, 2008).

### **Lack of 'place awareness' in social work with children and families**

#### **'Out of Authority' Residential Care Placements for Looked After Children**

Publicity following the trial of a network of men convicted of sexually abusing a group of girls living in the Rochdale area in 2012 brought to public attention not only the growing dangers of child sexual exploitation, particularly for children living in residential care (Beckett, 2011; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2012; Home Affairs Committee, 2013), but also the widespread practice of local authorities placing children in residential care outside of their 'home' area, often hundreds of miles away.

At the time that the Rochdale case came to public notice, for example, over a third of all looked after children in England, and *45 per cent of those in residential care*, were placed outside of their local authority area. The North West region of England, where Rochdale is situated, had the highest proportion of both providers of, and places in, residential care for children in the country. A quarter of all children's homes in England at this time were located in the North West (41 in Rochdale alone), even though the local authorities in that region were only responsible for 17 per cent of all looked after children nationally. Similar over-provision of residential care in relation to the number of looked after children also existed in other parts of the country, including the West Midlands (16 per cent of children's homes for 13 per cent of LAC) and the South West (10 per cent of children's homes for 8 per cent of LAC). This contrasted sharply with the position in Greater London, which had the lowest proportion of children's homes in the country (6 per cent), even though the local authorities in that region were responsible for 15 per cent of all looked after children (Department for Education, 2012).

This 'export' of children in residential care occurred despite the fact that the legislation in England (Children Act 1989/Children Act 2004) requires local authorities to make sufficient provision to meet the needs of all looked after children in their area, with any accommodation 'normally' to be within the local authority's area and near to the child's home. It appears, therefore, that the higher costs associated with providing residential care in Greater London had been allowed to override children's best interests. As a result, large numbers of children were placed in (often privately owned) residential homes in parts of the country where housing was cheaper and staff wages lower, with little apparent regard for the children's connections to their home area. This practice demonstrates a lack of awareness of (or disregard for) the importance of attachments to people *and places* in children's lives, with the routine use of out-of-authority residential placements in some parts of the country resulting in large numbers of vulnerable children being exposed to increased risks to their well-being. These include not only the practical difficulties of maintaining contact with family and friends, but also being cut off from the *familiar places* which, as we have seen, play such an important role in children's identities and their feelings of security and belonging.

#### Assessing the Identity of Children in Need

Another aspect of social work which demonstrates a lack of awareness of the important role that place plays in children's well-being concerns the assessment of their needs. Official guidance issued to practitioners in all parts of the UK for the assessment of children in need and their families makes no mention of the role that the places in which children have grown up, or from which they or their parents originate, may influence their development and well-being. In Wales the guidance suggests that assessments of a child's identity, for example, may include information about their '(r)ace, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability (and) feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups' (National Assembly for Wales, 2001b, p. 19), thereby completely overlooking the role of place in the development of identity. The guidance issued to practitioners in Scotland, which uniquely is presented from the child's perspective, includes three domains ('How I grow and develop', 'What I need from people who look after me', 'My wider world') and individual sections ('Confidence in who I am', 'Understanding my family's background and beliefs', 'Belonging') which *could* refer to the role of place in children's lives, but none of them actually does so (Scottish Government, 2008). The guidance in England and Northern Ireland (HM Government, 2013; Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2008) is generally less detailed than that in Scotland and Wales, but once again it makes no mention of the role of place in the lives of children or their families.

This would not matter if practitioners demonstrated a degree of 'independent' place awareness in their own practice. Unfortunately, however, studies of social work

assessments of children in need have found that social workers tend to simply reproduce the words and phrases used in statutory guidance in their assessments (see, for example, Thomas and Holland, 2010). The result is that there is likely to be little, if any, consideration of the role that children's attachments to or identification with place may have played in the development of their identities or any other aspect of their well-being, let alone how these issues might inform any services to be provided

### **Promoting place awareness in social work with children and families**

In an effort to challenge the lack of place awareness which afflicts social work with children and families in the UK, an expert seminar for practitioners was held on this subject at Northumbria University in November 2012, after which participants were invited to keep a journal detailing how they had attempted to incorporate greater place awareness into their practice. Examples drawn from the journals of three participants are presented to illustrate some of the ways in which their practice had been influenced in the weeks and months following the seminar.

The first example builds on the theme of assessing the identities of children in need discussed in the previous section. A social worker based in an inner-city duty team found that many of her colleagues did not seem to know what information to include under the 'Identity' section of the forms that they were using for assessing children in need, which she described as 'very much under-used and misunderstood'. As in the study by Thomas and Holland (2010) referred to above, the social workers in this team tended to comment only on the aspects of children's identities suggested in the official guidance (e.g., age, gender, nationality, status in family), with the result that there was no mention of the role that place played in the identity of the children concerned. This was something which the social worker who had taken part in the seminar was beginning to address in her own assessments, as well as trying to influence the practice of her colleagues and students placed in the team.

Another participant in the seminar provided information about a piece of work that he was undertaking, which involved the assessment of a single carer for short-term fostering. The applicant lived in the same location in which she had been brought up as a child, and the social worker noted that she had a strong attachment to this area (and the wider region), which gave her an understanding of how important it would be to promote the 'sense of place' of any foster children placed with her, both in terms of maintaining attachments to their area of origin and promoting a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar area. The social worker commented on the fact that, having previously looked after a child from about twenty miles away (for another agency), the applicant was '...sensitive to the feelings and needs of children placed outside their home area, even

when this may not be a great distance away in terms of miles'. The assessment also provided information about some of the physical and social characteristics of the street in which the applicant lived, which included children of all ages and featured a high degree of social integration, with neighbours typically 'looking out for one another'. The social worker commented that this would provide any child placed with the applicant with 'opportunities for play and interaction with a range of adults and children, which would help to promote the development of their place identity and attachment'.

The third participant also discussed a fostering assessment she was undertaking, which involved a female carer wishing to offer a permanent placement for an eight year-old girl already living with her on a temporary basis. The social worker noted the way that, because of the carer's awareness of her attachment to and identification with the area in which she lived, she also recognised the importance of the child's attachments, not only to her family and friends, but also to the *place* she came from. The social worker commented on the way that the carer had helped the child to cope with the sense of 'dis-location' she initially experienced by enabling her to maintain regular contact with her *home area*, as well as some of the people who lived there. In noting the way that the sense of dislocation experienced by children placed too far away from their area of origin can contribute to placement instability, the social worker also commented on the way that the carer had already proactively worked to help the child develop an attachment to this new area. She did this by encouraging the child to play out in the street with other children, as well as consciously avoiding using the car whenever possible and encouraging the child to walk the dog (within limits appropriate for her age and stage of development), thereby maximising her opportunities to become familiar with and explore her new surroundings and begin to make some local connections. It can be seen that this example draws on the findings of the research carried out in Fife which has already been discussed and was presented at the seminar, recognizing the importance of promoting opportunities for children to gain first-hand experience of their local area (Ross, 2007). This enables children to become familiar with their surroundings and develop the sort of 'weak ties' with the people who live there which generate feelings of belonging and security.

## **Conclusion**

At the heart of the issue about the meaning of place in social work with children and families there is a paradox. On the one hand, adults asked to talk about their identities typically refer to the places where they come from and where they currently live. For example, when participants in a study about identity, diversity and citizenship in Ireland were asked at the start of their interviews to 'Tell me about yourself', they made frequent references to the places in which they had grown up or now lived. The

interviews revealed the complex ways in which the participants thought about place, often making fine distinctions between local areas which were woven into their overall sense of Ireland as 'home' (Inglis and Donnelly, 2011). Also, when participants from Great Britain, Ireland, France and Spain, involved in an international survey, were asked in interviews how close they felt to the town or city, county and country where they lived, the level of identification with place was very high in all four countries. Whilst few of them ranked it as the *most* important aspect of their identity ('family' usually came top of the list), in all four countries place was more or less equal in importance to any other aspect of identity, including gender, occupation and religion (International Social Survey Programme, 2003).

On the other hand, however, we have the whole body of social work literature in the UK (and elsewhere), including government guidance and the practice which flows from it, which almost completely ignores the meaning of place for children and families. So, whilst practitioners' descriptions of their own identities in one study were found to be 'rich in personal details, dynamic and *contextual*', their assessments of children in need conveyed 'only narrowly defined and negative aspects of children's identities, with many descriptions standardised and replicated between reports' (Thomas and Holland, 2010, pp. 2622 and 2617, emphasis added). None of the reports made any mention of the role of place in the formation of children's identities.

Whatever the reasons for the lack of place awareness which currently afflicts social work with children and families in the UK and elsewhere, it is clear from the evidence developed within a wide range of other disciplines that identification with and attachment to place plays a very significant role in most people's lives. In relation to the examples of lack of place awareness discussed in this paper, for example, it is surely obvious that most children placed in residential care, a time when they are very likely to be feeling upset and insecure, would benefit from remaining *near* to their home area, with familiar surroundings acting as a reassuring anchor in what is otherwise likely to be a sea of distress and uncertainty? And if practitioners recognise their own attachments to and identification with important places in their lives, surely they owe it to the children (and adults) with whom they are working to incorporate information about the role that place plays in *their* lives when they are undertaking assessments? It would clearly not be acceptable to make decisions about a child's future without considering, say, the influence of the child's race or religion, and yet it appears that social workers are routinely making such decisions without considering the meaning of place for children's identity and feelings of security and belonging.

This paper has explored the links between place, identity and well-being, and has examined two recent examples of lack of place awareness within social work, as well as presenting a small number of practice examples of the potential benefits of greater place awareness. Whilst there is clearly much that still needs to be understood about

the meaning of place in social work with children and families, it is hoped that the issues raised here will prompt policy makers, academics, teachers and practitioners to give it greater consideration in the future.

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