Place attachment & place identity:

First-year undergraduates making the transition from home to university

Abstract

This paper examines the issues emanating from the transition into a new social and cultural environment distant from the home, the context of which is provided by the transition from home to university. The study analyses the transitional process over a period of five months, using data obtained from in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation of ten first-year undergraduates who moved to study at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham. It explores the mediating variables that impact place attachment and place identity during the transition from home to university. Within this context consideration is given to how participants made sense of changes in their socio-spatial environment, the ensuing problems and challenges of doing so, and how these meanings affected self-perceptions and self-evaluations. The analysis demonstrates how participant's stories of the transition evince an abiding concern with the loss of place, manifest in terms of an erosion of a sense of belonging, attachment and continuity and an undermining of home's capacity to symbolise the self. The implications of such accounts for our understanding of place attachment and identity are then explored. The paper concludes by advocating a holistic approach to our conceptualisation of place, given that place meanings are constantly being evaluated and redefined in light of changing social and physical relationships with place and between people and place.

Key words: Place attachment and place identity; transition from home to university; first-year undergraduates; people-place relations

1. Introduction

Every year tens of thousands of students prepare to pack their worldly belongings into a few cardboard boxes and make the transition into university life. Despite a 40 per cent rise in the number of first-year full-time students living with their parents between 1997 and 1999, around 80 per cent of all full-time undergraduates in the UK now attend a university away from their family home (Sanders, 2001).

Academic and public discourse traditionally regard the transition to university as a positive experience, involving new opportunities and perhaps most notably the chance for personal and self development. Nevertheless, the transition involves change for all students and for most it is frequently greeted with mixed emotions, especially where geographical relocation is involved. For students who leave home to take up residence at university the transition is additionally complicated by a more profound break; distancing themselves from existing social support networks produced by families and close friends (Fisher *et al.,* 1985). This is a daunting problem many first-year students have to cope with and is amplified when home is not in easy commuting distance (McAndrew, 1998). Subsequently, some students experience feelings of displacement, as they have left the place, their home, which until then had provided a grounding and source for their safety, security and identity (e.g. McAndrew, 1998; Tognoli, 2003).

For most people home plays a central role in everyday life and possesses rich social, cultural and historical significance and holds numerous psychological meanings, which are of profound importance for people in shaping their identities (Moore, 2000). These meanings are associated with

the symbolic nature of home as a private space, to which people have become attached, as it is shared by loved ones, contains fond memories and evokes feelings of warmth and security.

This paper seeks to understand the mediating variables that impact place attachment and place identity during the transition from home to university. As such it explores the importance of home as well as journey, stability as well as change, and positive as well as negative experiences in shaping our conceptualisations of place experience as a dialectal process (Relph, 1976).

Research literature on home loss and place attachment has examined the disruption caused by, relocation and moving (Matter & Matter, 1998). However, the situation of students making the transition from home to university has, as yet, received scant attention. This is a context involving deliberate separation, sometimes extending over a period of several years, but which, unlike these other situations, may arguably involve lesser trauma and provide an opportunity for gradual adjustment, coping, adaptation and long-range planning (Tognoli, 2003).

According to Yorke & Longden (2004: p.40) 'students find the first year a daunting, intimidating and alienating experience'. In England alone some two-thirds of withdrawals are made by first-year full-time students (Yorke, 1999). Therefore, the life-course juncture posed to first-year students, with its ensuing challenges and disruptions, presents an ideal arena for research on place attachment and identity development (Cassidy & Trew, 2004).

2 Literature review

2.1 Place attachment & place identity

The places we inhabit and frequent are said to hold the deepest meanings and be the focus for very strong sentimental and emotional attachments, as Relph (1976: p.43) asserts: "there is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security". Discourse exploring people's emotional relationships to place(s) is replete with various references to several key analogous concepts. These include place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992) topophilia (Tuan, 1974), insideness (Rowles, 1983), place identity (Proshansky *et al.,* 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996) and sense of place/rootedness (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1980) to name a few. There is, however, *"considerable overlap between factors such as emotional bonds, affiliation, behavioural commitment, satisfaction and belonging, which are loosely associated with theoretical descriptions"* (Pretty *et al.,* 2003: p.274). Such ambiguity and lack of clarity regarding relations between these concepts continues to enliven and complicate this field of study.

  Given the conceptual, methodological and epistemological tensions regarding the relation between place attachment and place identity it is possible to discern a number of different stances within the literature (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004). Perhaps the most obvious example cited by Hernández *et al.,* (2007), is where several authors consider them to be the same concept and either use both synonymously (e.g. Brown & Werner, 1985) or operationalise attachment in terms of identity (Stedman, 2002). To

differentiate further, Moore (2000) suggests that where place attachment focuses on evaluations of places; place identity focuses more on the way in which places form part of one's identity.

For Proshansky *et al.*, (1983) though, place identity is theoretically conceived as an individual's strong emotional attachment to a particular place or environmental setting, which comprises of "clusters of positively and negatively valenced cognitions of physical settings…[that] help to define who and of what value the person is both to himself and in terms of how he thinks others view him" (Proshansky *et al.,* 1983; p. 74). Consequently, place identity is forged around a "deep-seated familiarity with the environment, a sense of bodily, sensuous, social and autobiographic 'insideness' (Rowles, 1983) that arises as the result of individuals' habituation to their physical surroundings" (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; p. 457). In this respect place identity is seen as the integrating concept under which attachment is subsumed (Lalli, 1992; Puddifoot, 1995; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Conversely, some argue place identity is a form of place attachment and in this respect place attachment is viewed as the integrating concept (Altman & Low, 1992). Other authors have even considered place identity and place attachment as dimensions of a supraordered concept, such as sense of place (Hay, 1998). Finally, another proposal suggests that place attachment is a multidimensional construct that incorporates factors such as identity, dependence on place and social bonds (Kyle *et al.*, 2005).

, Place attachment is indeed a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that incorporates several aspects of people-place bonding, including behaviour, affect and cognition which are central to the concept. It involves the interplay

of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviours and actions in reference to a place (Altman & Low, 1992; Proshansky *et al.,* 1983). People develop affective bonds with places that are in part to do with satisfaction, as places permit control, foster creativity and provide opportunities for privacy, security and serenity (Altman & Low, 1992).Nonetheless, bonding also entails evaluation, and more identity related aspects as well as objective criteria, such as length of stay and involvement in the local area and within social networks (Moore, 2000). Hence, attachment may incorporate people because the social relations a place signifies are inextricably tied to the attachment process. This consensus is shared by Altman & Low (1992: p.7) who contend that: "… attachments may not only be to landscapes solely as physical entities, but may be primarily associated with the meanings of and experiences in place – which often involve relationships with other people" (Altman & Low, 1992: p.7).

2.2 A place called home: literal & metaphorical interpretations of home

Scholars from anthropology, geography, sociology and environmental psychology have examined 'significant places' like the home in its many contexts and over the past three decades there has been a resurgence of interest in concepts concerning place, home and identity (Relph, 1976; Feldman, 1990; Case; 1996; Moore, 2000; Valentine, 2001; Holloway & Hubbard, 2001; Holloway *et al.,* 2003; Tognoli, 2003; Cresswell, 2004; Wiborg, 2004).

The concept of home transcends the material characteristics of domestic space. It is a space that people have made meaningful, situated geographically and socially, imbued with deep feelings and vested with

emotion (Cresswell, 2004). The very concept of 'home' suggests that it is a key element in the development of people's sense of themselves, as belonging to a place (Proshansky *et al.,* 1983). Home is a focal point of one's experiential space – "*the central reference point of human existence*" (Relph, 1976: p. 20) – serving as a unique place of familiar, known and predictable activities, people and physical elements (Feldman, 1990). This importance of home is emphasised through the state of well-being many experience following its presence, vicinity or accessibility and the state of distress created through its absence, remoteness or inaccessibility (Easthope, 2004).

   As home is a term imbued with personal meanings, different people understand home to mean different things at different times and in different contexts (Easthope, 2004). These meanings are constantly being evaluated and redefined in the light of changing social and physical relationships with place. Therefore the concept of home perhaps needs (re)examining within particular theoretical, social and cultural contexts.

2.3 Dislocation and distancing: The journey away from home

Within the literature there has been an increasing exploration of the processes by which home comes to have meaning (Moore, 2000). Given that first year undergraduate students are one such group who are likely to experience geographical relocation from their familial home, the significance of journeys away and their contribution to the definition and meaning of home itself warrants further attention. For Case (1996), the concept of home gains meaning through taking journeys away. "By being away from home, the things, places, activities and people associated with home become more apparent through their absence" (Case, 1996: p.1). Therefore the meaning of

home (literally and metaphorically) crystallises through the journey away from (and absence of) home itself.

Home, like place identity, can be conceived as an implicit psychological structure: "In the course of everyday life, we tend to overlook its significance because our place behaviour and sense of 'being in place' unfolds largely without conscious reflection. However, at moments of change or transition, when the bond between person and place is threatened, the significance of place identity becomes apparent. Loss of place tends to provoke strong social and psychological responses precisely because it entails a loss of self" (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; p.458). Most scholars therefore contend that relocations invariably involve short-term disruptions that can be stressful (Brown & Perkins, 1992). This has given rise to experiences of 'dislocation', 'distancing' and to some extent place alienation.

By virtue of change and disruption most journeys away from home encompass some degree of subjective, self-perceived continuity across time and situation (Breakwell, 1986). This 'continuity' "involves not the complete absence of change but some connection between the past, the present and the future within identity" (Speller et al, 2002: p 43). Places like home can therefore act as makers or referents to past selves and actions. For some people, maintenance of a link with a specific place that has emotional significance provides a sense of continuity to their identity; a *place-referent continuity* (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Absence of such continuity is usually experienced negatively and may be particularly acute in the face of serious life events which threaten to disrupt and undermine continuity (Speller et al, 2002).

2.4 The transition to university

The transition to university is particularly pertinent for first-year students, as they are immediately confronted with a new set of social and intellectual challenges, which may raise questions about who they are and how they see themselves (Cassidy & Trew, 2004). For some, the transition is an opportunity to gain independence from their family (Fisher & Hood, 1987). For others, it is traumatic, owing to abrupt shift inherent in the transition and the move from a controlled environment to one in which students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives (Lowe & Cooke, 2003). This break with old routines and change in the on-going pattern of daily life will invariably create anxiety and distress, serving to undermine students' normal coping mechanisms. For most students the excitement and anticipation of experiencing a new environment and opportunity to gain independence does go some way toward mediating the trauma inherent in the abrupt nature of the transition (Tognoli, 2003).

  The move to university may represent the first time many students have moved in their life. Indeed, the nature of university virtually guarantees that long periods of time will be spent away from the family residence in an unfamiliar environment for those choosing to relocate. Gradual loss of the home may, therefore, arguably be facilitated by the lack of casual access to it. Though initial problems may arise, most cope with the transition and develop a sense of belonging and identity. For others, this may not come as easily, and in some instances not at all (Yorke & Longden, 2004). The consequences of failing to make a satisfactory transition to the new demands of university life present themselves in the form of drop-out, under-achievement and, perhaps,

lack of fulfilment (Lowe & Cooke, 2003). However, there is a general consensus that those who either withdraw or fail do so because of adjustment or environmental factors, rather than because of intellectual difficulties (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001).

Fisher *et al.,* (1985) propose that around 60-70 per cent of students report homesickness in the first few weeks at university and although for most this feeling disappears, as they begin to settle and form new relationships, many still continue to suffer and some may even experience more serious problems such as depression. It follows then that studies have favoured social and emotional adjustment aspects of the transition (Fisher *et al.,* 1985; Fisher & Hood, 1987).

Place attachments clearly promote and reflect stability; yet such attachments are not static. Instead, they change in accordance with changes in the people, activities or processes, and places involved in the attachments (Brown & Perkins, 1992). Significant disruption to any one of these elements will therefore serve to undermine individuals' place attachments and their associated place identity. Such disruptions to attachment and identity may, for instance, manifest via changes in place process or via changes in places themselves (Brown & Perkins, 1992). Voluntary relocation, and the transition from home to university, is a prime example of the latter; a change in one's socio-spatial environment and an example of changing and evolving people-place relationships. It is within this context that the meaning of places, and attachments to them, are evaluated and somewhat redefined, as the salience of place identity becomes apparent.

This paper seeks to understand the mediating variables that impact place attachment and place identity during the transition from home to university. Specifically, it aims to explore the influences on participants' place attachment(s) and place identity during the transition and to examine how participants' place identity evolves through the transition. In doing so the paper also considers the value of home in relation to place attachment and place identity theory, given the context of change and transition.

3. Research methods

The research presented here was from a pilot study carried out during the 2005/2006 academic year at the University of Gloucestershire, utilising first year undergraduates, and covers the first few months of their experience moving to university in Cheltenham. Semi-structured interviews were the main vehicle for eliciting information, although participant observation was also used.

The 'sample' compromised of 10 students chosen from 20 respondents to an initial background questionnaire that was administered during an induction trip for 150 Environment students. The ten were chosen to give a range of students who had relocated from their home to come to university. All participants were interviewed twice over a 5 month period to assess the extent of change in students' attachment to place and their corresponding place identity over time through the transition. Each interview lasted for around an hour with an average interval of 18 weeks between interviews. Most interviews took place in the participants' place of residence. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, though there was one exception as

three of the participants interviewed lived together and instead were interviewed as a group for convenience. Whilst this creates implications when comparing and analysing the responses to those of individual interviews it does, however, bring the added benefit of the group dynamic. Moreover, it allowed the opportunity to study ways in which individuals collectively make sense of phenomenon and construct meanings around it.

An interview schedule was constructed around the key themes of place attachment, identity and the transition process. This framework allowed participants to explore issues they felt important, answering in their own terms, whilst allowing some degree of comparability between interviews. It comprised a series of open-ended questions, which were used in a manner that allowed a more flexible intensive study of participants' thoughts and feelings. Certain core questions were, however, asked in each set of interviews, allowing for greater ease of comparative analysis. For instance, in terms of defining 'home', participants were asked broad questions about what 'home' meant to them; how they defined and identified with it.

Each interview was tape-recorded with the permission of the participant. No one declined being recorded. To protect participants' privacy and right to anonymity all were given aliases. Tape-recorded interviews were then transcribed and content analysed for common themes by conducting successive readings of interview transcripts over the duration of the study, a thematic method of analysis.

Issues of rigour were addressed through a two-stage analysis, whereby initial analysis was undertaken by the first author, with the second author then reading through 50 per cent of the transcripts to check the validity of the

interpretations. In the rare cases where there was a slight difference in interpretation the cases were discussed and a common interpretation was agreed. Some readers may be concerned by the relatively small number of participants in the study. Generalisation is not the intention of the study. Rather, this study uses qualitative methods with the aim of exploring a deeper understanding of the topic (Mazumdar, 2005). Small-scale studies of a similar nature are not uncommon within the literature concerning place attachment and place identity more generally. For example, studies by both Twigger-Ross & Uzzel, (1996) and Possick, (2004) surveyed 20 and 11 participants respectively in a similar fashion.

4. Results & discussion

Results demonstrate the richness and complexity of people's relationships to places; the influences upon these relationships; and how people-place relationships evolved through the transition from home to university. Participant's discussions of the significance of the transition tapped into critical issues and complications surrounding the transition into a new social and cultural environment distant from the home. The salience of the transition, then, can be read as a disruption to attachment via changes in place – a threat to the bond between person and place – and, ultimately, a factor in undermining place identity.

   Without doubt, home was found to be an important place in terms of self-definition, as Ellen explained: "Home gives you an identity. It makes you who you are because your family are there and they make you who you are. The things that are there make you who you are". Not only did the decision to

move from home represent self-concept change but it also fostered the opportunity to develop new identities (Hormuth, 1990). Through seeing new places and different people and experiencing new situations a new perspective on life was acquired, allowing a transcendence of present place and present self (Case, 1996).

4.1 Home as a locale for family & friends

Place identity was associated with the significant and somewhat poignant nature of home both as a place and in terms of the seemingly multi-faceted and interrelated aspects that constitute it. For most participants, the first thing that they readily identified with from home was the physical structure of the house. This was because the house served as a visible reference point for individual and shared memories and functioned as a nodal point for social exchange (Wiborg, 2004).

   Relationships between people and place were important for most participants' individual and collective sense of (place) identity. Significant people including family and friends were found to be highly valued elements inextricably tied to the attachment process. Participants were therefore very much attached to their families and friends who simultaneously connected them to and defined their home. For Kate, home was "Northamptonshire because it's where my family and all of my friends are … where my family are will always be my home because that is where I root myself … it is always somewhere to go back … I have lived there all my life. I have never been anywhere else". This use of emotive language clearly reflects the ideological aspects of home, which is wed to family (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004).

Absence and separation from home as the locality for family and friends caused participants to question established norms and patterns of behaviour because "they [family] are the ones you have your memories with … where you live doesn't really matter" (Erica). For some, the significance of people over place itself was deliberated upon. "The people are the most important thing to me … place has quite a strong influence … I would pick people over the place" (Liane). "I didn't miss Cheltenham, but I guess I missed the people here" (Gemma). Several authors have also noted the importance of social ties to place (e.g. Altman & Low, 1992; Valentine, 2001).

Although family and friends were an important feature of home associated with participants' identities the value of home as a place, particularly familiarity with it, cannot be overlooked. "I have lived there all of my life and my parents have lived there for like 25 years … but if my parents moved away I'd definitely like to still think of it as home …. home is where family is because there is like memories especially if you have been there all of your life … [family] is a big part of home." (Lee). Here Lee illustrates the multi-layered and multi-dimensional nature of his perceptions of home. On the surface he suggests that even if his parents moved his conception of home would not change. He then goes on to suggest that his interpretation of home is dependant on the location of his family. This very contradiction perhaps illustrates Lee's conscious reflection on his notion of home.

4.2 A new experience

The experience of going to university and making a transition into a completely different environment, academically and socially, is unlike anything most participants encountered before: "It was like a roller-coaster. Some

minutes you're up, some minutes you're down. Then there is everyone else who is also on their little roller-coaster ride. It was a bit of a shock to the system, going to something that is totally different. It can be a bit daunting" (Ellen).

For most, the duration in and experience of Cheltenham coupled with exposure to the university environment were also important. "After a year here this will feel like a second home … I'm spending so much time here getting to know Cheltenham and the people and my friends" (Luke). The ensuing sections explore the prevailing thoughts and preconceptions that participants articulated throughout their experience.

4.2.1 Dislocation

The initial point of disjuncture from the home was frequently greeted with mixed emotions and often encompassed feelings of displacement and dislocation, as participants sought to locate themselves in a new, unfamiliar, environment. According to Fullilove (1996) such trauma arises, at least in part, from a disruption of the place and identity relationship. This view is perhaps evident in the following comment by Kate: "Before I left home I felt very scared and sick a lot of the time. I just tried not to think about it and then it sort of crept up that I was leaving. I wasn't really ready to leave but I think once you're here and your parents have gone, you just don't think about it. You just throw yourself into everything that people are willing to do, so you don't get left out".

Participants cited a number of reasons for experiencing a sense of dislocation and in doing so distanced themselves from their home and previous life. The desire to experience something new and different was a

prominent and recurring theme, as Erica asserts: "I have lived in Winchester all of my life … it is nice to branch out and see some other places. It's like so many people from my college went to the same university so they have got like four or five good mates going there. I just think it's quite nice to go somewhere different with new people. It seems like it's a big step in your life, you know growing up kind of thing; a part of life". "I have lived there for 18 years and I'm bored senseless now. I just couldn't have coped living there another year. It was suffocating me and because it is very small it was like you know everyone. I know it is right for me to be here; otherwise I wouldn't be here if it wasn't so I am just embracing it with open arms" (Gemma)".

Dislocation was, therefore, generally seen in a positive light, which encompassed negative connotations, as Kate recalled: "it was nice to get away from people but "really scary to start with [because] this is the longest I have been away from home. I was away from my parents for 2 weeks when I was slightly younger but apart from that I have never been away without my parents until I moved here". Negativity surrounding dislocation was mediated through continuity both across time and situation. "I didn't want to go and I was so nervous. I just wanted to stay at home because I was one of the first people to go from everyone at home. I was so worried what it would be like and whether I would enjoy it. I didn't want to let people down if I decided that I didn't want to be here but as soon as I got here it all changed. I was so excited in some ways but didn't know what to expect in other ways. I was really nervous in the last few days" (Liane).

From the discussion above, it is evident that dislocation, in effect, undermined participants' social psychological processes (Dixon & Durrheim,

2004). First, it undermined participants' sense of place familiarity and 'insideness' (Rowles, 1983) by removing them from the accustomed surroundings of home. Second, it undermined participants' sense of place attachment and belonging by violating the mutual people-place relationship. Third, it undermined the very capacity of places to symbolise central aspects of self by disrupting 'place-referent continuity' (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Dixon & Durrheim, 2004). This influenced place's ability to signify participant's identity by acting as a stable reference point for experience, values, relations and actions.

4.2.2 Continuity

Many participants described the move from home and transition to university as ending a phase of life, recognising that identity changes with relocation. "I think going to university is about moving onto another stage of your life, your're not in school anymore, you're not a child anymore. You are on your own now. I think university is a good way of making that step. I think moving away from home is what makes you more independent, an adult" (Kate). Here the move from home can be read in terms of self-concept change – a disruption to the experience of continuity – and a necessary part of personal growth, self-development and becoming an adult. Whilst this consensus was held by most participants, others recalled their emotional resilience to the move and accompanying feelings of homesickness associated with loss of place and people. "[Moving] was a completely different change, as I have lived at home my whole life, though it is not as if you are moving house completely because you go back there but it was a whole new way of life, which I wasn't really sure if I wanted to follow" (Liane). Despite moving and

realisation of change in her life Liane reaffirms her intention to retain links with

home and thus her need for continuity and connection to past aspects of her

life.

For most participants, the necessity for continuity with their previous lifestyle

was not salient until after relocation to Cheltenham. It was only then that

participants became aware of the effects of a different lifestyle and began to

miss the past (Speller *et al.,* 2002). Thus, home remained as an anchor for

place dependant memories; providing a place-referent continuity (Twigger-

Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Both its physical and social structure are embodied

with many symbols that evoke deep feelings and emotions. Through the

transition from home the process of distancing culminated in the loss of

tangible connections to participants' identity – a conscious discontinuity – and

a dislocation from place. This 'conscious discontinuity', as described by

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996), refers to the way in which people find places

that are more congruent with their sense of self. Subsequently, separation

from a previous environment and a movement towards a new environment is

said to mark a new stage in one's life or an emerging identity.

In terms of the development of place identity it was also necessary that

participants experienced continuity, both across time and situation, relative to

Cheltenham. Continuity therefore stimulated the development of roots as

participants came to know and identify with specific places. The distinction

between different places within Cheltenham itself and what they represented

to participants was also an important feature in developing a sense of place.

4.2.3 Adjustment and familiarisation of new environments

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The accompanying experiences of adjustment and familiarisation deriving from dislocation from participants' home and continuation, across time and situation, were important aspects in developing a locally-rooted identity and thus a renewed sense of place. "I think it is all about time … as you are here longer you get used to it … you like it because it is familiar … I don't think I will ever know it like Winchester though" (Luke). Through the processes of adjustment and familiarisation participants constructed various images of Cheltenham because of the repertoire of symbols it evoked. This occurred both on an individual and collective level (Wiborg, 2004).

For many, Cheltenham was perceived and 'read' according to the desires it represented and needs it fulfilled, which invariably involved differentiating it from home. "There is so much to do [in Cheltenham] and I can walk into town really easily. I think it is quite safe [in Cheltenham] apart from my friend's laptop got stolen from her room. I personally feel safe walking into town in the daytime though. There are also shops, pubs, clubs and restaurants and cinemas and stuff like that all within a stones throw, which is what I most like. The people seem to be really nice too … at home it is not like that at all; it is really different. That's why I like it more [in Cheltenham] because it is a change" (Liane).

Interestingly, some participants distinguished university and Cheltenham as two distinct elements, contesting attachment as Cheltenham simply served as locality for education. "You live there because you go to university then you start to get the bonds ... you like the town and area you live ... it all just grows. I am glad I did come to Cheltenham now though. I mean it is a nice university but I am glad it is in Cheltenham" (Erica). The prevailing perception of

Cheltenham as a classy, upmarket area that was pleasing in aesthetic terms was a fundamental influence upon establishing an attachment. Participants therefore derived intrinsic satisfaction from the physical appearance of the environment. "I think [Cheltenham] is quite a classy area, which is nice. I think it has got a lot of heritage and as I am a heritage student it's quite a good thing. It has a lot going for it, lots of shops, which is good" (Kate).

In some instances preference for a particular environment was a prerequisite for attachment. "I suppose one of the other reasons I came here was because of the size of the place, as I didn't want to go to London because I don't think I would have liked it; it would have been too city like" (Cathryn).

Time and positive and/or memorable experiences also served to influence adjustment and familiarisation, as did previous experience of being away from home and experience adapting to new environments. For Lee, his experience of boarding school, which was his college, and month long trip to Australia without family were of obvious significance in his adjustment to a new environment. Clearly then, it is not just places themselves that are important. Rather, and perhaps central to the processes of adjustment and familiarisation, it is 'experience-in-place' that creates meaning; the process of socialisation with the physical world (Manzo, 2005; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

4.3 Fostering attachment

The characteristics of place were found to inspire and cultivate devotion, spirituality and tranquillity. This was manifest on a number of different levels, encompassing tangible and intangible aspects and tacit meanings and

assumptions associated with place. The elements participants used and how they used them to emphasise attachment, identification or distance, demonstrated how they perceived their relationship with Cheltenham as a place and in doing so how it was ascribed meaning (Wiborg, 2004). This section examines the influences upon such attachment, as participants sought to 'read' the town, decoding its symbols and meanings that to them represented status, stimulation and security.

4.3.1 Establishing social relationships

The ability to establish new relationships was a particularly valued feature of the attachment process for all participants. Consequently attachment was, in part, confirmed by others and the degree of interaction experienced with them. The importance of making friends quickly was widely acknowledged, owing to the security they provided. For some, meeting new people was a challenging and daunting process as it meant leaving their 'comfort zone'. Others expressed their excitement to meet new people, asserting their desire and social skills at doing so. "I have never had a problem with talking to people and meeting people but you never know, you might be in a flat with people that you really don't like and I'm not used to that. I am used to people enjoying life and who like to socialise and do sports and music and everything. I was worried that I would meet people that weren't into that. I was maybe a bit worried that I was leaving my girlfriend and friends and family, my comfort zone but then I was excited. It was like a new chapter … I think if I didn't have friends at university I would consider not coming to university" (Kevin). For Erica though, coming with someone from home, Luke (her boyfriend) helped her to feel more at ease.

For some participants, their ability to establish relationships was seen to be tied to their place of residence, which was a setting for attachment and identification itself. Chris specifically expressed his disappointment about not being in Halls, as he perceived he would meet a lot more people if he was there. "If I was in halls I would have met a lot more people. I was disappointed about not being in halls". This elitist status contrived from Halls served as a symbol to simultaneously define and exclude those that do not belong to its environment. "I thought I would meet more people but that's what not living in halls does. People in halls seem to stick together. I mean we do stick together as well but I don't think we try to on purpose. We don't go let's not go talk to her and walk off and go home. I did think I would make more friends on my course but they all seem a bit weird and all too old" (Erica).

The importance of getting to know the right people and forging good friendships enabled participants to feel settled and at ease. "I wouldn't want to be here if I hadn't met anybody I got on with" (Liane). "Friends have attached me to Cheltenham in a big way … whenever I think of Cheltenham I think of them … I relate to the student atmosphere in Cheltenham … when I'm together with my friends I definitely feel Cheltenham is where I belong" (Kate). For many participants, the prospect of joining a sports team or a society presented an ideal opportunity to establish new relationships and was the principal reason Luke signed up to the Pool Club, Cricket Team and Badminton Team. Subsequently, attachment to place was also a way of talking about social and cultural attachment as the value participants ascribe to place spatially encodes social and cultural attachments (Wiborg, 2004).

4.3.2 Maintaining existing social relationships

Although acquiring and adapting to a new group of friends was of profound importance, the desire and/or need to maintain existing relationships was recognised. For some, this was seen as a balance between the two, whilst others sought to sever ties with people they no longer identified with. "Before I came to university I was really close to friends at home but now when I go back I feel really distant from them ... we have definitely grown apart but when together we try to act the same, though there is definite change in people … I feel I have made better friends at university" (Kate). This point clearly illustrates the growing sense of alienation from home that most participants were accustomed to, particularly with regards to friends.

The occurrence of, and separation from, boyfriends/girlfriends, who either resided at home or who were attending another university were another important feature of the transition. The duration and intensity of these relationships also served to influence the extent to which links with partners were maintained. This arguably distanced some participants from Cheltenham, as they expressed the effect this had upon their adjustment and the lengths to which these relationships were maintained. "I speak to my boyfriend most days … It was difficult to start with, as we have been together for two years, which is quite a long time to be with somebody and then not see him all the time but it has got easier … It has been hard and I think it probably got harder after Christmas than it was before because you get used to being apart and then over Christmas I was at home a lot" (Cathryn). "I went and saw [my girlfriend] last week but I do miss her. I am seeing her in a couple of weeks though, which will be good. I speak to her everyday, I have to … Having a long distance relationship was quite hard but you just have to

work at it. It is not easy to get a bus or train and go to Bristol. It is not exactly

what I want to do but you do it. I want to do it though, but she does come here

as well" (Kevin).

4.3.3 Proximity to home

Access and proximity to home were highly valued by participants and for most

were seen as a prerequisite to choosing Cheltenham. Through retaining

connections to the home some degree of continuity was established in the

face of change. This allowed place attachments to be loosened in a gradual

fashion, imposing some stability on what could otherwise be an abrupt change

(Brown & Perkins, 1992). "This was the furthest North I wanted to come"

(Ellen). "I didn't want to move really far like Bradford or Devon but I think this

is good because it is only an hour away. If anything goes wrong at home or I

broke my leg or something then I can get home. But I wanted to move away

so I have got my independence" (Gemma). Participants therefore sought to

define geographical boundaries across time and space, determining where

they wanted to come. Conversely though, a necessary amount of distancing

from home was influential in fostering attachment, negating homesickness

and in resisting the temptation to frequently go back. "I have only been home

twice, once was for only a day and the other time was my first weekend home.

I don't want to go home too regularly because I don't want to cut myself away

from university life" (Kate). To an extent this supports the work of Proshansky

et al., (1983) who have suggested that the distancing of one's self from a

place is a necessary prerequisite for the reflection and thought needed to

develop an awareness of one's place attachments. Place identity is therefore

"developed by thinking and talking about places through a process of

distancing, which allows for reflection and appreciation of places" (Proshansky *et al.,* 1983: p.61).

4.4 The transition from home reflects an evolving (place) identity

The transition from home to university significantly influenced participants self-image and identity and, to a greater or lesser extent, their associated perception of home. "I think everyone is trying to settle in and settle down. I feel settled in Cheltenham and I'm all sorted on my course and in my room and I have got a job so I'm like home from home really" (Gemma). This distanced participants from their locally oriented lifestyle enclosed within a set of distinct social and geographical relations (Wiborg, 2004). As mentioned previously, a person's concept of home may gain meaning through journeys away and such movement may facilitate an expansion of what is perceived as home (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). Certain experiences within the transition also made places salient, particularly the processes of reflection, introspection, dislocation and continuity, which may be seen as identity issues (Manzo, 2005). "If I had to decide where my home was it would be where I was brought up, where my family is, where I have lived most of my life. I don't know what I said before [at the first interview], but definitely now I can appreciate things that are good and bad here as well as the positive and negative things of living in a smaller, less urban place" (Kevin).

4.4.1 The value of home

For all participants, their perception of what home constituted remained largely unchanged and very much dependent on it as a locale for family and friends. "I would like my parents to stay there so it will always be my home"

(Kate). "At the moment [home is] defiantly back in Winchester, with my family and everything. But I think after like a year here this is going to be feeling like a second home too because I'm getting to spend so much time here and getting to know Cheltenham and the people and my friends and stuff like that … its growing on me" (Luke). The home is characterised by multiple dimensions that impinge on the attachment process some of which, such as family, are more salient than others in shaping peoples' place identities. This is particularly evident through the transition, as the precise location of home morphs from one setting to another. For some, the whereabouts of home had remained static and the notion that Cheltenham was (or could become) their home was questioned from the outset. "I don't think I'll ever see this place [Cheltenham] as like a 'home home'. I see it more as somewhere to stay whilst I'm at university. It's almost like my old college, which was a boarding school; I view this place in a similar way" (Lee). "I do not really see Cheltenham as home; I see my halls as my home but still more where I come from in Hertfordshire. That is what I have known as home but it probably will change" (Liane).

   Others sought to question what home was and what it meant to them following their transition and in doing so afforded a less rigid definition to it. Indeed, the difference in attitudes between participant's interviews was an interesting feature encountered upon and is illustrated in the two extracts below. These were taken from participants' second interview and demonstrate their process of reflection and introspection. "My view of home has changed quite a lot. I don't feel as if Hertfordshire is home so much. I don't necessarily feel as if home is where you grow up, which I always thought it was. I mean it

is just how you feel about a place" (Liane). "I think [my views of home] have changed because I always considered that home would be the place I would want to be and now I much prefer being here. I think it is also to do with some stuff going on at home, as my parents are going through a divorce. It is not like it used to be and it has changed since I have left so I find home to be a bit of an uncomfortable atmosphere, whereas being here I can just be with my friends and it is not uncomfortable. I think my view of home has definitely changed" (Kate).

Some participants reported that their prior home had undeniably changed both physically and socially and with it their perception changed too. "So much has changed in the three months I have been away" (Gemma). "Aspects of my home have changed from what I knew … you expect to go home and things to be exactly the same" (Erica). These changes whether real or perceived somewhat eroded the much valued familiarity of home. For Kate, her home and perception of it had changed unquestionably, as her parents were going through a divorce. This coupled with the absence of most of her friends from home caused her home to become marginal as a social arena and prompted her to experience a sense of alienation from home.

Ultimately though, all participants recognised the significance of their prior home, as a place where they originally came from; a place where they were born and raised and shared significant life experiences. The perception of home did, however, expand and crystallise through the transition as participants expressed to now having "two homes" (Kate) and being somewhat split between them. "Both are home. It is like having two different lives" (Lee). "Cheltenham is kind of a second home but it is not my home. I

don't feel as secure up here as I do at home. I feel more attached to my home in Devon then I do to here" (Cathryn). Consequently, home became more than one place and a site and situation that had to be adapted to accordingly, such as during term-time and vacation when homes were often 'exchanged'. "I'll adapt to my surroundings. I hope I do adapt again but I'm sure I can switch to university life or home life" (Kevin).

   For many, the more they got to know Cheltenham, the more it felt like home, though this was tempered by their realisation of the transient nature of their stay. "Students are just passing through … they are here three years then they are gone and another load come … I am here to get my degree then I will be on my merry way" (Erica). Hence, the extent to which an individual's home was altered following the transition is intimately bound up with their own perception of it and affirmation that it can be altered.

8. Conclusion

Our relationships to places are seemingly complex and evolve both through space and time. Both the concepts of place attachment and place identity, which themselves are intimately linked, are dynamic and are susceptible to disruption. Significant disruption to the people, activities or processes, and places involved in place attachment(s) and place identity will ultimately threaten to undermine the very foundations of these concepts (Brown & Perkins, 1992). A holistic approach to place meaning and place experience is therefore necessary; one that considers change and disruption. The transition from home to university context provides an abrupt and clear illustration of the

manifestation of place attachment and place identity, congruent with socio-spatial change.

During the transition from home to university it is evident that a host of interrelated mediating variables impact place attachment and place identity, including place significance, the occurrence (and extent) of social relationships, sense of dislocation, continuity across time and situation, and proximity to home. In this paper, we have outlined these variables and explored their importance in shaping our conceptualisations of place. More specifically, we have aimed to explore the influences on participants' place attachment(s) and place identity during the transition and to examine how participants' place identity evolves through the transition. Clearly, the transition into a new social and cultural environment distant from the home is of profound significance. Not only did disruption from the transition shape participants place attachment(s) and related place identity but it also shaped their 'experience-in-place'. Thus, place meaning was in part created and confirmed through in-place-experiences (Manzo, 2005).

Without doubt, place significance is a key mediating variable impacting place attachment and place identity. Home is an important place – a critical locale for both developing and maintaining place identity – as it possesses emotional significance and provides some degree of stability within peoples' lives, serving as a reference for past action and experience; a locus of memories and meaning. Thus, home constituted an anchor for place dependent memories; a place-referent continuity (Speller *et. al,* 2002). The relative significance an individual derives from a place then, will govern the extent to which they are attached to it or, indeed, affect the role that particular

place plays in shaping their place identity. Over the course of 5 months it was evident that participants consciously reflected on their transition into a new environment and decision to move from home. In part this represented self-concept change and realisation of new identity development as the very significance of place(s) were (re)evaluated (Hormuth, 1990). One particularly interesting facet was that all participants expressed different feelings towards their home following the transition, asserting less dependence on it and realising that the notion of home (and significance of a place) is itself open to interpretation.

Looking across participants' accounts of the transition we can see that the occurrence (and extent) of social relationships were important in the attachment process. Family and friends were synonymous with home and necessary for self-definition, forming an intrinsic part of participants' place identity and a feature of home to which participants were very much attached (Feldman, 1990). Some participants even deliberated the salience of these relationships, advocating that social attachment was greater than physical attachment. Moreover, the importance of the social dimension in the growth of attachment emphasises the point that place attachment has become identified with attachment to the people who live in that place (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). During the 5 month duration of the study it became evident that participants' sense of place and place identity did evolve through the transition. However, location itself was not enough to create a sense of place and engender attachments. Rather, they emerged from the involvement between people, and between people and place (Pretty *et al.,* 2003).

Place attachment & place identity

In so far as it is conceived as a disrupting process of place attachment and place identity, the transition may invoke a profound sense of *dislocation* – expressed, for example, within accounts of place alienation, nostalgia and disorientation (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004). Such a marginalisation of place has been referred to as 'dislocation' by Breakwell (1986). A change in place may, therefore, alter the relative importance of various aspects of an individual's identity, particularly aspects the previous location supported (Speller *et al.,* 2002). Consequently, the 'dialogue' of dislocation evolved through the course of 5 months following participants' immersion in their new social and cultural environment. However, it was only after a long process of interaction that the mixed emotions and feelings of displacement and dislocation associated with the initial abrupt disjuncture began to subside.

Participants' tendency to maintain close relations with a specific place made it clear that continuity (both across time and situation) is a defining feature of place attachment and place identity. The 'loss of home' precipitated by dislocation thus represents a change in a potentially significant component of the experience of continuity (Brown & Perkins, 1992). For instance, distancing from home facilitated a lack of visible identification and connection to one's identity thereby disrupting participants' sense of continuity. Proximity to home is a necessary antecedent for the maintenance of connections to the home itself, thereby establishing some degree of continuity in the face of change. This provided the opportunity for gradual adjustment and afforded some stability on what could otherwise be an abrupt change (Brown & Perkins, 1992). In this sense, place attachment and place identity that revolve around home require the acknowledgment that it is accessible.

This study has addressed the dilemma undergraduates encounter when making the transition from home to university and their accompanying emotions and experiences when confronted with living in, and being integrated with, two distinct places. Given the context of transition examined here it is clear that experiences of belonging exist alongside experiences of alienation, that identity exists within the context of difference and that the notion of home includes movement and change (Manzo, 2005).

The specificities of the transition into higher education have received scant attention, though it is an important issue that affects tens of thousands of individuals each year. This is exacerbated by the fact that participants are seemingly integrated with two distinct (and significant) places, as Wiborg (2004: p.427) contends:

> "For many of the students, the relationship to their home place is emotionally charged, representing ambivalent feelings connected to the fact that they have left to pursue higher education; a distancing process that separates them both spatially and socially from their home place and background."

To this end the concept of home needs re-examining within particular theoretical, social and cultural contexts.

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