Displacing place-identity: A discursive approach to locating self and other

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Questions of ‘who we are’ are often intimately related to questions of ‘where we are’, an idea captured in the environmental psychological concept of place-identity. The value of this concept is that it attends to the located nature of subjectivity, challenging the disembodied notions of identity preferred by social psychologists. The topic of place-identity would thus seem to be a productive point around which the sub-disciplines of social and environmental psychology might meet, answering calls for greater disciplinary cross-fertilization. This study contributes to this project by presenting a sympathetic but critical evaluation of research on place-identity. It argues that such research is valuable in that it has established the importance of place for creating and sustaining a sense of self. However, drawing on recent developments in discursive approaches to social psychology, the authors identify several limitations with existing work on place-identity. This critique is then developed through analysis of an ongoing research programme located in the changing landscapes of the new South Africa.

Place is increasingly treated as a unifying concept in disciplines such as environmental psychology (Russell & Ward, 1982) and human geography (Cloke, Philo, & Sadler, 1991, chap. 3). Although based within diverse intellectual traditions, such work broadly rejects a ‘minimalist’ (Stokols, 1990) conception of the ‘placing’ of self and society: the conception that places are fixed, empty and undialectical backgrounds to, or containers of, social action. Places are re-conceived as dynamic arenas that are both socially constituted and constitutive of the social.

Despite their relevance for many of the phenomena studied by social psychologists, place dynamics have been widely ignored within the discipline (cf. Canter, 1986). Evidence of this neglect can be found in many topic areas, and the present authors wish to focus on the area of identity. According to geographers and environmental psychologists, questions of ‘who we are’ are often intimately related to questions of ‘where we are’. Indeed, many of the social categories that are routinely investigated by social psychologists are inextricably bound to notions of place (e.g. ‘community’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nation’). Correspondingly, many of their research environments

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inscribe meanings about the identities of their users or inhabitants (e.g. ‘home’, ‘workplace’, and even the ‘laboratory’). On an occasional basis, such matters are broached by social psychologists (e.g. McClenahan, Cairns, Dunn, & Morgan, 1991; Simon, Kulla, & Zobel, 1995), but they hardly feature as one of the discipline’s substantive concerns. The topic of place is rarely indexed in canonical texts; nor is it a focus of empirical or theoretical enquiry. In the present authors’ view, this neglect has impoverished the field because, as Pile and Thrift (1995, p. 380) have observed: ‘subjectivity and place cannot be separated without foreclosing an understanding of the located subject and the agency and identity of place.’

Given the variety of relevant work that has been produced by their companion discipline, environmental psychology, social psychologists’ neglect of the place-identity nexus is perhaps surprising. Certainly, this topic would appear to be a productive point around which the two sub-disciplines might be ‘conjoined’ (Taylor, 1983), answering calls for greater disciplinary cross-fertilization (see Altman, 1976; Bonnes & Secchiarioli, 1995; Canter, 1986). The present study aims to contribute to this project by providing a sympathetic but critical evaluation of research on place-identity. Its argument is that such research is valuable in that it has established the importance of place for the production of self and has isolated some of the social psychological dynamics involved. However, drawing on recent developments in discursive approaches to social psychology, three limitations of existing work are identified: (1) it has largely ignored the rhetorical traditions through which places, and the identities they embody and circumscribe, are imbued with meaning; (2) it has disregarded how place-identity constructions, as deployed within everyday discourse, are used to accomplish discursive actions, including the justification of certain kinds of person-in-place relations; and (3) most importantly, it has marginalized the political dimension of one’s representations of place and of how one locates oneself and others. These ‘displacements’ of the concept of place-identity are then explored in the context of a research programme situated in the changing landscapes of the new South Africa.

The concept of place-identity in environmental psychology

A key moment in environmental psychology’s critique of a disembodied notion of identity was the publication of Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff’s (1983) paper on place-identity (cf. Groat, 1995). Although it has later been subjected to various criticisms, the paper was invaluable in establishing place-identity as a sensitizing construct, bringing to fruition earlier calls for an ‘ecological conception’ of self and personality (cf. Craik & McKechnie, 1977). Adopting a general and inclusive definition, Proshansky et al. described place-identity as a ‘pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings’ (1983, p. 60). As a distinctive substructure of the self, they reasoned, place-identity might function to underwrite personal identities, render actions or activities intelligible, express tastes and preferences and mediate efforts to change environments.

Later researchers have found this formulation suggestive, if a little nebulous. Though using Proshansky as a theoretical resource, Korpela (1989) prefers a
narrower definition of place-identity: as a psychological structure that arises out of individuals’ attempts to regulate their environments. Through practices of environmental usage, he argues, we are able to create and sustain a coherent sense of self and to reveal our selves to others. At the heart of this psychological structure is a sense of belonging, for ‘place-belongingness is not only one aspect of place-identity, but a necessary basis for it. Around this core the social, cultural and biological definitions and cognitions of place which become part of the person’s place-identity are built’ (Korpela, 1989, p. 246, emphasis in original). In this conception, human actors are cast as imaginative users of their environments, agents who are able to appropriate physical contexts in order to create, here, a space of attachment and rootedness, a space of being. The personalization of dwellings is an oft-cited example. By this practice, ‘home’ places are organized and represented in ways that help individuals to maintain self-coherence and self-esteem, to realize self-regulation principles.

The importance of belonging to processes of self-definition has been noted by scholars working in other research traditions, confirming Korpela’s claim that it is a central feature of place-identity (see e.g. Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Tuan, 1980). Rowles’ (1983) research with the elderly residents of an Appalachian community provides an eloquent empirical demonstration of the idea. Rowles distinguished between three senses of ‘insideness’, expressing different aspects of his respondents’ affinity with their surroundings. ‘Physical insideness’ designated their ‘body awareness’ of their environment, expressed as a kind of tacit knowledge of the physical details of place (e.g. knowing how to find one’s way). ‘Social insideness’ designated their sense of connection to a local community, a recognition of their ‘integration within the social fabric’ (p. 302) (e.g. of knowing others and being known). Finally, ‘autobiographic insideness’ designated their idiosyncratic sense of rootedness. Often unspoken and taken for granted, autobiographical insideness seemed to arise out of individuals’ transactions within a place over time. It was this mode of place identification, Rowles suggested, that was especially important to his elderly respondents. Although they had witnessed considerable changes in their home town of Colton and had found their mobility increasingly restricted, they were able to maintain a sense of belonging by remembering incidents, places, contributions and relations in their personal lives there.

A problem affecting many formulations of place-identity—evidenced to varying degrees by the work of Proshansky, Korpela, and Rowles—is their tendency to emphasize the individualistic dimensions of place-identity.1 What this emphasis obscures is the collective nature of the relations between persons, identities and material settings. The work of Bonaiuto, Breakwell, and Cano (1996) and Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) has recently prioritized these group-based dimensions of identification with places and shall serve as a bridge to the present study’s own discursive approach. Their work is valuable in that it has pointed to a genuinely

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1 It is not implied here that such work is ignorant of the social dimension of place identification. In fact, Rowles’s conception of ‘social insideness’ is obviously an attempt to theorize this dimension. Nevertheless, in the present authors’ view it is fair to diagnose an individualistic bias in psychological research on place-identity. This may explain the emergence of alternative concepts which attempt to capture the connectivity between group identity and places, such as ‘place tradition’ (Jacobi & Stokols, 1983).
social understanding of place identity by showing how places may become significant and contested arenas of collective being and belonging.

Bonaiuto et al. (1996) examined the relationship between place identification and evaluations of the natural environment. Specifically, their study investigated the role of local and national identification in shaping individuals’ perceptions of local and national beach pollution. Their sample consisted of 347 schoolchildren who were living in six resorts on the southern English coast. Three of the resorts’ beaches had previously been classified as EC blue flag (unpolluted according to EU criteria) and three had been classified as dirty (polluted according to EU criteria). Each participant was asked to complete a battery of questionnaires, which included measures of nationalism, local identification and evaluations of levels of beach pollution. The study’s results indicated that participants who were strongly attached to their town or nation tended to evaluate their local and national beaches more favourably than participants who were less strongly attached.

Interpreting these findings, Bonaiuto et al. (1996) outlined two theoretical principles. First, they suggested that denials of beach pollution may have represented a form of defensive differentiation, a cognitive strategy designed to preserve positive in-group identity by maintaining positive ‘in-place distinctiveness’ (p. 172). Second, they suggested that their results demonstrate how place identities may become established at different levels of the self (e.g. local/national) in order to structure environmental perceptions at different sociospatial scales (cf. Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Both of these propositions are clearly compatible with broader models of collective identity, notably with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Self Categorization Theory (Turner, 1987). Indeed, the possibility that social identities implicate insider/outsider distinctions that operate across varying sociospatial levels has been noted by other researchers working in these social psychological traditions (see e.g. Cinnirella, 1997; Echabe & Castro, 1996; Simon et al., 1995).

Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) investigated a further dimension of collective identification with place, exploring the contested relevance of certain totemic sites for national identity. They asked two groups of Irish respondents to express their attitudes towards four historic places in Ireland: Glendalough (a monastic tower built to defend locals against Viking raids), Newgrange (an ancient burial mound and passage), the General Post Office (scene of the 1916 uprising against British rule in Ireland) and Trinity College in Dublin. One group identified themselves as ‘traditionally’ Irish, whereas the other group professed a modernized version of Irish nationalism. Two patterns can be lifted from a more complex set of results. First of all, both groups attributed positive values and feelings to Glendalough and Newgrange, perhaps because of their antiquity and undisputed links to Irish cultural ideals (art, heritage, faith). However, their evaluations of the other sites revealed some interesting disagreements. For example, the non-traditional group rated Trinity College favourably, associating it with feelings of ‘hope’, ‘fascination’ and ‘proud to be Irish’. The traditional group, by contrast, rated the college unfavourably, associating it with feelings of ‘apathy’, ‘confusion’ and ‘ashamed to be Irish’. Interpreting their results, Devine-Wright and Lyons speculated that for ‘traditional’ respondents, Trinity College may have symbolized the illegitimacy of British
intervention in Ireland, but that this interpretation did not apply for ‘non-traditional’ respondents, who thus held a more positive set of place representations. In its attention to the historical, collectively shared and contested political nature of place identifications, Devine-Wright and Lyon’s (1997) work might be read as illustrative of an emerging research tradition within environmental psychology, labelled the sociocultural paradigm by Saegert and Winkel (1990). In at least some of its commitments, this tradition approaches the concerns of discursive researchers in social psychology because, as Bonnes and Secchiaroli (1995, p. 179) note: ‘orientating the environmental psychology of place with this perspective, it becomes possible to take into consideration the area of “place communication and denomination”, in order to study what in this case would be named “place discourse”’.

**Displacing place-identity**

This section outlines the present study’s threefold displacement of place-identity. This displacement is addressed not so much at any given theorist’s approach to the concept, as at the overall problematic that informs a variety of approaches, a problematic that defines place-identity as a specific kind of phenomenon: individualistic, mentalistic, uncontested and apolitical. As mentioned above, such a critique is incipient in some environmental and social psychological writings and, in point of fact, Sarbin’s (1983) reply to Proshansky et al. (1983) anticipated its emergence. Sarbin found the definition of place-identity as a cognitive entity, the properties and functions of which might be reliably measured, to be limiting. He favoured a humanistic approach that explored how people construct a sense of locatedness through a symbolic process of ‘emplotment’: a form of self-creation whereby person–place relations are turned into a credible self narrative. Sarbin felt that the writings of poets and dramatists might reveal as much about this process as those of scientists, and would probably have admired Seamus Heaney’s lines in *Seeing things* (1991, p. 101):

The places I go back to have not failed
But will not last. Waist-deep in cow-parsley,
I reenter the swim, riding or quelling
The very currents memory is composed of,
Everything accumulated ever
As I took squarings from the tops of bridges
Or the banks of self at evening.

Can one better capture the links between place and identity than in this figure of a man who, remembering his childhood by the river, finds himself standing on ‘the banks of self at evening’? Place and autobiography are effortlessly united through language.

In focusing on the narrative devices by which individuals locate themselves, Sarbin’s work resonates with recent developments in social psychology, which have increasingly attended to the role of language in constituting social reality and subjectivity. However, in the present authors’ opinion, Sarbin slips too readily into

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2 Human geographers such as Tuan (1991) and Gutting (1996) have likewise drawn attention to how place identities may derive from linguistic practices such as story-telling.
a humanistic view of place-identity as the outcome of voluntary acts of self-creation. Once again, this position de-emphasizes its political and collectively determined dimensions. The authors’ own take on the interrelation between place and identity is indebted to the emerging field of discursive studies (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harré & Gillet, 1994; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and especially to Billig’s (1987, 1991) work on rhetoric and ideology. There now follows a sketch of the three implications of this field for understanding place-identity.

Relocating place-identity

One might proceed from an aptly geographic question: where is place-identity? For Proshansky et al. (1983), as for many environmental psychologists, it is a predominantly cognitive structure to be discovered in the heads of individuals. To be sure, it is also a highly contextualized form of identification, deriving from individuals’ engagements with their material contexts of action and interaction. Nonetheless, Proshansky et al.’s ‘potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings’ is construed primarily as a property of individual minds, a ‘monadic’ structure in the sense described by Burkitt (1991). Even recent social psychological revisions of the concept, such as that proposed by Bonauto et al. (1996), have retained a view of place identity as a mental entity, the nature and intensity of which varies from individual to individual.

A discursive approach might begin by relocating place-identity, by removing it from the vault of the mind and returning it to the flux of human dialogue (cf. Billig, 1987). This approach, as Danziger (1997) has elegantly explained, entails a psychology that shifts individual mental processes from inside the head into ‘the interpersonal space of the conversation’ (p. 411). It thereby reconstitutes place-identity as something that people create together through talk: a social construction that allows them to make sense of their connectivity to place and to guide their actions and projects accordingly. One advantage of this approach is that it recovers the irreducibly social origins of place identification. Not only does it acknowledge the relevance of places to their collective senses of self, but it also highlights the collective practices through which specific place identities are formed, reproduced and modified. A discursive approach thus combats the individualism that haunts research in the field. Language becomes the force that binds people to places (cf. Tuan, 1991). It is through language that everyday experiences of self-in-place form and mutate; moreover, it is through language that places themselves are imaginatively constituted in ways that carry implications for ‘who we are’ (or ‘who we can claim to be’).

Place-identity as a resource for discursive action

For discursive psychologists, the language of place cannot merely be a medium for representing external environments. Nor can it merely be a means of revealing a subjective sense of belonging. Instead, as a symbolic resource, constructions of place are oriented to the performance of a range of social actions—blaming, justifying, derogating, excusing, excluding and all of the other things people do with words
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(cf. Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992). Although they have not featured specifically in discursive research, the present authors believe that constructions of place-identity may act as symbolic resources of this kind. In fact, they wish to speak of the grounds of identity in a double sense: first, as a sense of belonging to places; and second as a rhetorical warrant through which particular social practices and relations are legitimated. After all, in ‘putting ourselves in place’, people are often claiming territorial entitlements or affirming sociospatial ideals, a point neglected by theorists who view place-identity discourse simply as a medium for ‘expressing’ place cognitions and attachments (Proshansky et al., 1983) or ‘revealing’ inner dynamics of self-categorization and differentiation (Bonaiuto et al., 1996). A discursive approach would thus seek to map how varying ways of discursively locating the self may fulfil varying social and rhetorical functions.

A study by Barnes and her colleagues recently exemplified this kind of re-reading of the functions of place discourse (Barnes, Auburn, & Lea, 1998). Using interviews with the police as textual data, they analysed representations of travelling people in the south of England, revealing how constructions of travellers as ‘transients’ were used to justify practices of surveillance, control and exclusion (see also Sibley, 1995). Implicit in such constructions was an ideology that seemed to normalize a sedentary lifestyle and identity, an ideology that, following McVeigh (1997), Barnes et al. labelled ‘sedentarism’. Sedentarism may also help to conceal the spatial ethics held by travellers themselves, whose identity projects may incorporate alternative notions of nomadism, pilgrimage and festival (cf. Hetherington, 1996).

One implication of this style of research is that it discloses the links between constructions of place-identity and relations of power, which brings us to a third criticism of theories of place-identity.

Place identification as an ideological tradition

Soja (1989) cautioned against analyses that treat places as innocent, depoliticized arenas in which people live and act. Keith and Pile (1993) similarly warned that one must beware the ‘transparency’ of place, which may mask the fact that ‘Politically there is a reactionary vocabulary of both the identity politics of place and a spatialized politics of identity grounded in particular notions of space’ (p. 20). Each of these authors contend that it is precisely because places, and the identities they uphold, appear self-evident that a critical perspective must be adopted.

Reframing this point in Billig’s (1987, 1991) terms, one might say that the rhetorical traditions through which people locate their selves and others are also ideological traditions that sustain relations of domination. Although Billig’s work has emphasized the historical dimension of ideologies, his recent account of nationalism shows awareness of their geographic dimensions (see also Agnew & Corbridge, 1995; Jackson & Penrose, 1993; Taylor & Wetherell, 1999). Billig (1995) states that nationalism cannot be understood only through its passionate expressions: its quieter moments too must be considered. As a ‘banal’ construction, it relies upon seemingly trivial gestures, including deictic references to the national homeland (e.g. ‘this country’). In terms of this spatial rhetoric, replayed daily in the mass media, we
are positioned within a particular type of geopolitical system, ‘its dangerous potentials appearing so harmlessly homely’ (Billig, 1995, p. 127).

Rose (1996) has likewise underlined the spatial grounds of nationalism, offering a refined account of the politics of place-identity. She claims, for example, that nationality is often represented so as to disconnect certain groups from the national character, a process facilitated by images of place. The historical association between White Englishness and the rural landscapes of the Shires is a case in point. Not only has this association concealed how such settings have thrived upon the labour of the very people they exclude, it has also perpetuated the idea that Black citizens of England belong in urban areas, notably in the ‘degraded’ areas of the inner city (see also Keith, 1991). Developing this theme, Rose (1996) suggests that collective identities are typically fashioned through symbolic contrasts between ‘our space’ and ‘their space’, expressed in terms of ‘paradigmatic oppositions’ (Shields, 1991) such as marginal/central, primitive/civilized or First World/Third World (see also Duncan, 1993). She believes that place identity derives not only from individuals’ attachments to their immediate environments, but also from their ‘dis-identification’ with others’ spaces and from their relationship to dominant ideologies.

Specializing in the recovery of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988), a discursive approach would also remain sensitive to the moments when such ‘placings’ of self and other are challenged. The photography of Ingrid Pollard, for example, deliberately misplaces Black subjects in traditional pastoral settings, ironizing their exclusion from the sites of English heritage and identity (see Rose, 1996). Once again, such resistances have been underplayed in writings on place-identity, which tend to adopt an individualistic and apolitical definition of the concept. It seems that an alternative framework for investigating the links between places and identities is required.

**A discursive approach to locating self and other: A South African research programme**

The beginnings of such a framework have been established by a research programme currently being conducted in the new South Africa. It is widely recognized that apartheid was a system of exclusion in which communities became separated from one another and found themselves identified with particular places (Christopher, 1994). One might say that apartheid, at least on one level, was all about ensuring that people kept to their proper places. With the advent of the country’s new democracy, however, the divided landscapes of the old South Africa are gradually breaking down (Saff, 1994), forcing its citizens to re-evaluate their place in the social order. Material and political transformation, in other words, is unsettling the old place identities.

It is from this vantage that the present authors review the research of Dixon and his colleagues. The initial phase of their project investigated a case of residential desegregation in which a group of Black squatters become permanent residents of Hout Bay, a formerly White township situated in the Cape Province (see Dixon, Foster, Durrheim, & Wilbraham, 1994; Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Dixon, Reicher, & Foster, 1997). Much of the public controversy surrounding this event concerned the
nature of the relationship between people and place, as Extracts 1 to 3 below indicate. The second and ongoing phase of this research programme is examining media discourse about the desegregation of South Africa’s beaches, focusing on the period between 1982 and 1995 (see Durrheim & Dixon, 1998). During that time, beach apartheid was progressively dismantled, an event that once again prompted public debates about place and identity. Extract 4 is illustrative. In drawing textual examples from these studies, the present study’s aim is not to present an evidential case supporting a discursive approach to place identity. Rather, it is to use these texts as a means of clarifying some of the distinctions between traditional and discursive approaches to the topic, indicating how each might interpret the same body of evidence. The texts were selected in order to achieve this limited objective.

Extract 1. Now we understand that the squatter camp is to be enlarged and that thousands of trees are to be uprooted. We chose to live on the hillside in Hout Bay because the trees are here and they give one a sense of stillness and solitude. Seeing the squirrels hopping through the trees, the owls at dusk and our noisy Egyptian geese with all their quacking makes the area a delight.

The squatter community in its enlarged form will now be only 140 m from our home, a home that we used to enjoy before our lives were shattered by some “official” in the Cape Provincial Administration who decided that this was the one and only place these unwanted people could go […]

Our family, like many Hout Bay residents, would like to register total unacceptance of this plan of destruction and rape of our environment (Letter to the Ed., Cape Times, 25 September 1992, emphasis added; originally cited in Dixon et al., 1994, p. 284.)

Extract 2. Can you imagine the thrills of returning to Hout Bay after an absence of several years in which we cruised around the world, being involved in the managing of resorts both in the Pacific and Caribbean area.

Our trip from DF Malan through Cape Town was impressive, lots of new buildings in tasteful styles, old ones restored to their former glory, pedestrian walkways in the town centre added up to a well organized development that will attract many tourists in years to come, generating important foreign exchange.

We were highly impressed. South Africa had indeed come a long way towards international standards, actually exceeding many other classical cities in the world. Then over the top of Suikerbossie “horror” struck, relentless destruction of trees, mass influx of people, large squatter camps, high rise buildings, cluster housing and God knows what else I have not seen.

This was certainly not the Hout Bay I came to love many years ago when I put up with the long drive to town, the extra charges for rates and taxes etc.

Progress, yes, by all means but channelled in a manner acceptable to all ratepayers and tourists visiting our Republic.’ (Letter to the Ed., Sentinel News, October 1992, emphasis added; originally cited in Dixon et al. 1997, p. 332.)

Extract 3. They’ve got to decide for themselves where they want to be. Do they want to become civilized westerners or do they want to stay tribal? If they want to stay tribal then they mustn’t come down here. But they’re trying to get the best of both worlds without having the wherewithal to pay for it and to accomplish it and this seems to be a major problem on their part. Because are they an agricultural ranching type people? Are they planters and growers? You see we’ve got to talk of groups here we can’t talk of individuals.’ (Taken from an interview with a ‘white’ resident of Hout Bay, emphasis added.)

Extract 4. ‘On occasions during the past years I have taken my little children to the beachfront paddling-pools and nearby beach and have always come away with a feeling of warmth and contentment. It was my misfortune to expect the same when I ventured there on January 2. We were revolted at the filth and stench around the paddling-pool. Garbage was on the sidewalks and the water in the pool was brown. Some of the bathers using the pools were half-naked, while others were fully clothed … Durban beachfront and its amenities are forever lost to whites. Never

Place-identity is sometimes defined as a psychological structure of which people are only partially conscious. Often, it is only when established person-setting relations break down that one can recognize its full significance. Extracts 1–4 might be interpreted as this kind of ‘bringing to consciousness’ of certain cognitions and emotions, prompted by the sudden transformation of a cherished place. In Extract 1, it is the despoliation of a natural environment that is at issue. In the writers’ plea for the preservation of his or her surroundings and the values they embody (solitude, stillness) one might infer that an ‘ecological self’ has been disturbed (cf. Bragg, 1996). In Extract 2, the sense of place destruction is bound to a nostalgic conception of place now vs. place then. A town that has previously acted as a material referent for self has been marred by the ‘horror’ of ‘relentless destruction of trees, mass influx of people, large squatter camps, high rise buildings, cluster housing, and God knows what else I have not seen’. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) might suggest that a form of place-referent continuity has broken down. In Extract 3, the presence of an ‘alien’ group which does not conform to local values (urban, civilized) is the source of concern. One could say that the speaker’s sense of ‘social insideness’ (Rowles, 1983), of being one of ‘us’ in ‘our’ space, has been disrupted by an influx of ‘foreigners’ (‘If they want to stay tribal then they mustn’t come down here’). Finally, the theme in Extract 4 is that the beach’s role as a space of family activity has been degraded by the pollution and unmannerly dress of others. Autobiographic insideness, the ‘feeling of warmth and contentment’ the writer once experienced on family outings to Durban’s beachfront, has been lost.

In short, each of the foregoing extracts might be seen as reflecting a dis-location of identity brought about by a sudden transformation of valued places. From this perspective, the sense of loss that they express is not only a loss of place but also, more profoundly, a loss of self. For as Krupat (1983) insists: ‘The concept of place-identity makes explicit the key role that a person’s relationship to the environment plays not simply in terms of a context for action or in facilitating certain forms of behaviour, but in becoming “part of the person”, of being incorporated into one’s concept of self’ (p. 343).

This type of approach is found to be valuable in two ways. First, it highlights a dimension of self-definition often neglected by social psychologists, the dimension of location. Second, it implies a theory of how place identity may mediate one’s attempts to modify the material environments of social life. Describing this ‘mediating change function’, Proshansky et al. (1983, p. 70) stated that:

Discrepancies between a person’s place-identity and the characteristics of an immediate physical setting arouse relevant and related cognitions in the individual for reducing if not eliminating those discrepancies. They involve knowing what’s ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ within the physical

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3 Bragg recently proposed that the concept of ‘ecological self’ is a necessary extension to work on place-identity. Whereas place-identity research has generally focused on the links between self and built environments, she wishes to accord greater importance to natural environments.

4 This concept captures the ways in which physical environments may become part of identity by acting as a reference for past experiences, relations and actions. It designates the ‘maintenance of continuity via specific places that have emotional significance for a person’ (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p. 208).
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setting and what has to be done to bring about change in it or reduce the discrepancy between it and the place-identity cognitions of the individual.

Place-identity is said here to implicate certain ‘environmental skills’ (ibid, p. 72) that enable people to recognize ‘discrepant’ settings and to know how to alter those settings. Proshansky et al. (1983) claim that such discrepancies can become so intense that they result in defensive withdrawal, with individuals avoiding certain places in order to preserve self-integrity (e.g. ‘Never again will I take my family near the place’; see Extract 4 above). The general point is that people are motivated to seek out, or create, environments that are compatible with their sense of who they are.

This line of argument is interesting not only because it relates place identity to how people appropriate and transform everyday environments, but because it also illustrates some of the assumptions that discursive psychologists would want to challenge. First, they would want to dispute the notion that place identities are best viewed as ‘cognitions in the individual’; second, they would insist that place identities are more than forms of environmental ‘knowing’; and third, they would question the absence in this account of any political awareness—an awareness, for example, of how conceptions of the ‘discrepancy’ between identity and physical contexts may be ideologically defined.

A discursive reading would treat these extracts as part of a public dialogue whereby certain discourses of place and identity are being (re)produced (e.g. the discourse of ecology or of beaches as venues for family vacations). Discursive psychologists would concede that people may not fully recognize how such discourses enter into and shape their lived experience of places. (They may remain beneath conscious awareness, forming part of the implicit reasoning process that Shotter (1993) calls ‘knowing of the third kind’. ) Equally, they would highlight the potentially dilemmatic nature of people’s rootedness in palaces (cf. Billig et al., 1988). In this sense, Extracts 1–4 would be seen not only as reflections of solipsistic minds: they are also moments in a collective struggle to define the nature of geopolitical change in South Africa. The word ‘struggle’ is crucial here because it highlights the rhetorical organization of accounts of the located self and the material consequences of location and dislocation.

A discursive approach would treat Extracts 1–4 as action-oriented accounts, designed to accomplish certain ends by presenting themselves as reasonable (defensive rhetoric) while undermining alternative versions of events (offensive rhetoric) (cf. Potter, 1996). Extract 1 would thus be re-read as an attempt to warrant a particular version of changing relations in Hout Bay. Even a causal gloss suggests how the author’s ‘self-locations’ may work here to support the account being offered. By constructing a space of personal and familial commune with nature, he or she is better able to depict the new settlement as a form of ecological desecration (a ‘rape of our environment’) and to demand its curtailment or exclusion. Indeed, Dixon et al. (1994) suggest that ecological arguments of this kind provide a peculiarly defensible rhetoric of exclusion precisely because they invoke non-anthropocentric forms of identity. They seem to elevate the ‘fragile earth’ above sectional interests.

That place-identity may act as a resource for action is evident in other of the selected extracts. Consider the narrative presented by Extract 2, a nostalgic home-coming journey from DF Malan airport through Cape Town and excitedly on to
Hout Bay until, suddenly, the reader is confronted with the visual ruins of home. In this story, the loss of ‘place-referent continuity’ provides the ethical grounds for criticizing the changes that have occurred in the town; after all, ‘the Hout Bay I came to love many years ago’ has been defiled. A similar narrative construction is presented in Extract 4, where the story of a family’s trip to the beachfront paddling pools is interrupted by stark images of place contamination. The notion of ‘insideness’ that informs this account—in which past experiences of familial ‘contentment’ and ‘warmth’ are evoked—could once again be reinterpreted as part of the rhetoric of resistance to desegregation.

One of the most searching questions that could be asked of such accounts, after Billig (1987), is: what opposing constructions of people-in-place do they conceal or undermine? Suffice to say that Durban’s beachfront has operated historically as a zone of exclusion—represented, marketed and policed as a space for White families to enjoy fun in the sun. By appealing to the discourse of beaches-as-family-spaces, Extract 4 may thus be mobilizing a partial, strategic (and racialized) construction of the identity/place relationship (see Durrheim & Dixon, 1998). In order to explore this possibility, a discursive analysis would seek to retrieve the alternative person-in-place constructions that this kind of account is designed to obscure (e.g. the constructions employed by people who have been traditionally excluded from Durban’s main beach). Indeed, sensitivity to the rhetorically contested nature of constructions of place and place-identity would be taken as a sine qua non by discursive psychologists. It is arguably one of the features that distinguishes their research from research undertaken in comparable fields of inquiry (e.g. social representations).

The claim that place-identity acts as a rhetorical resource qualifies Proshansky et al.’s (1983) model of how it mediates reactions to ‘discrepant’ environments. They contend that discrepancies are cued by contradictions between a cognitive structure (place-identity) and an objective setting, which then ‘arouse relevant and related cognitions in the individual for reducing if not eliminating those discrepancies’ (p. 70). From a discursive viewpoint, the emphasis shifts towards studying the symbolic practices through which accounts of self-in-place help to constitute settings as incongruent. The nature of the ‘discrepancies’ involved, the logic used to specify what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ with settings, the formulation of ‘appropriate’ reactions, are all recast as rhetorical constructions. From this vantage, what is being displayed in Extracts 1–4 is not so much the ‘arousal’ of individuals’ psychological dissonance; rather, it is the strategic exposure of a series of transgressive presences—people, activities and physical structures that are portrayed as threatening to particular notions of place and place-identity (cf. Dixon et al., 1997).

When considering such constructions, one is reminded of the ideology of the old South Africa, where racialized people became identified with some places while being systematically excluded from others. ‘Who belongs where’ was a question that lay at the very heart of the doctrines of the old regime. At least in its more critical guises, a discursive approach would encourage a sensitivity to how such ideological traditions influence people’s placings of self and other (cf. Billig, 1988, 1991; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In this regard, one might analyse the foregoing extracts in terms of their potential for continuing the ideological traditions of apartheid, for revealing how ‘the themes of ideology are instantiated in ordinary talk, and how
speakers are part of, and are continuing, the ideological history of the discursive themes which they are using’ (Billig, 1997, p. 49). Discussion of this point is restricted here to the most obvious example, Extract 3, which comes closest to illustrating Korpela’s (1989) conception of place identity as centred on belonging. Here, a Hout Bay resident implies that an uncivilized, ‘tribal’ and ‘agricultural’ people do not belong in the town and that, if they expect to remain, they must shed this identity and its associated values (e.g. a lack of financial enterprise). However, whereas for Korpela belonging is conceived as a phenomenological sense of attachment, the present authors wish to emphasize its ideological foundations and political consequences.

The argument in Extract 3 works ideologically in three ways. First of all, it reproduces the myth that Black Africans naturally belong elsewhere, in some far away pastoral realm, and that their entry into urban areas somehow contradicts their origins (see also Duncan, 1993). This construction disguises an important facet of social existence under apartheid. Black Africans were often removed from the urban spaces that their labour had helped to create and forced to live in reserved areas in the countryside. A romantic image of the tribal space as the cradle of African identity provided a means of justifying this practice and of dissimulating its political functions (cf. Packard, 1989). The second way that Extract 3 works ideologically is by maintaining a racialized distinction between the residents of Hout Bay. In categorizing ‘them’ as tribal people who are ‘out-of-place’, is the writer not confirming a vision of Hout Bay as the preserve of civilized urban Whites? Said (1978) has called this relational process constructing the ‘imaginative geography’ of self and other and, like Rose (1996), he has emphasized its role in maintaining group hierarchies. Third, and perhaps less obviously, consideration should be given to the ideological position from which this account is spoken, the position from which ‘their’ presence is assessed (e.g. ‘They’ve got to decide where they want to be’). This is the voice of an insider, someone who speaks from a location powerfully within the community and thereby, at least implicitly, claims certain entitlements\(^5\) (i.e. the right to define who does or does not ‘fit in’). Mapping the parameters of this kind of ‘warranting voice’ (Gergen, 1989) might be a productive avenue of inquiry for a future discursive psychology of place identity.

A concluding point: the ideological structuring of place-identity has a practical implication for how the topic is investigated. It forces researchers to become reflexive about their own positions in the world. The authors of this study, for example, are White men who grew up in South Africa, who lived in segregated areas, relaxed on

\(^5\) Two further examples from the Hout Bay case study may help to clarify this idea:

As one of the oldest residents of this valley, I hang my head in shame over what is being done at present to destroy this last peaceful rural area located within the Cape Peninsula (Letter to Ed., Argus, 10 February 1993; emphasis added).

To say that this settlement forms part of Hout Bay and has been part of it for a considerable time is arrant nonsense. As a resident of almost 20 years, I know what I am talking about. (Letter to Ed., Argus, 12 October 1992; emphasis added).

In both of these extracts, the marked ‘self-locations’ can be read as attempts to qualify the speaker as an insider—someone able and entitled to determine who or what belongs here. Belonging, it seems, designates not just a phenomenological sense of one’s place in the world; it is also an ideological location from which the ‘in place’ and the ‘out-of-place’ can be diagnosed.
the country’s exclusive beaches and in this sense were co-opted into the geopolitical order of apartheid. They have found interrogation of this materially advantaged and ideological position to be a vital analytic resource. Too often researchers ignore the politics of their own place identifications and therefore sustain power relations through their academic practices. In their discussion of the relationship between gender and place-identity, for instance, Proshansky et al. (1983) have produced an interpretation that, from the perspective of current feminist writings, seems uncritical at best (cf. Bondi, 1993; Massey, 1994). The point is that if the ideologies of place identification are overlooked, researchers may unwittingly participate in their reproduction.

Not only are men and women biologically different but in fact these differences are compounded by differences in the social definitions of appropriate sex roles. A comparison of these two role groups should not only reveal these differences in how they view, use, and react to urban physical settings, but also in how each group perceives and solves problems of privacy, personal space, crowding and territoriality. For each one of these person/physical setting relationships we already know the prescribed and proscribed sex role characteristics of men and women impose differences on how the two groups deal with those relationships. (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 81.)

Conclusions

Discussing the possibility of establishing links between environmental and social psychology, Proshansky (1976, p. 362) expressed scepticism, warning that: ‘Social Psychology doesn’t just want to be a science or field of inquiry, it wants to be that kind of science or field of inquiry. I’m sure you know what I mean.’ Among other things, he was arguing that social psychology’s preference for an experimental methodology that reduces complex phenomena to ‘variables’ and ‘outcomes’ was ill-suited to exploring the holistic links between persons and their environments. In the present study, the authors have argued that the concept that Proshansky and his co-researchers later developed, place-identity, is nevertheless of vital significance to social psychology. Perhaps most important, it moves the discipline beyond both a disembodied notion of self and a conception of places as mere containers of the social. The present authors believe that research on place-identity may yet be a meeting ground between social and environmental sub-disciplines. Indeed, the symposium on place and self held at the BPS Social Section Conference in September 1997 indicates that this integration is imminent (e.g. see Gervais, 1997; Twigger-Ross, 1997).

Although this is seen as a constructive development, this study attempts to displace some traditional conceptions of place-identity in environmental psychology. The authors know what Proshansky means when he brands social psychology ‘that kind of science’ and would agree with his suspicions about the discipline’s insularity. However, in light of recent advances in discursive psychology, the authors would recommend an alternative framework for researching place-identity processes. Instead of treating place-identity as a mental structure that is formed through individuals’ transactions with their environments, they would emphasize its status as a collective construction, produced and modified through human dialogue, that allows people to make sense of their locatedness. The authors would also emphasize
its status as a resource for rhetorical and ideological action, a notion captured in the dual meaning of the phrase the ‘grounds of identity’. In their view, the ideological functions of place-identity have been particularly neglected by environmental psychologists and must become a focus of future work. The research of Dixon and his colleagues has been cited as one example of this line of analysis (cf. Dixon et al., 1994, 1997; Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Durrheim & Dixon, 1998).

In summary, the authors have argued that a discursive displacement of place-identity might permit a re-conceptualization of the person–place relationship. On the one hand, notions such as ‘rhetoric’, ‘discursive action’, ‘ideological tradition’ and ‘ideological dilemma’ might open up a critical, non-individualistic and action-oriented view of place-identity. On the other, they might permit a productive reworking of the conceptual apparatus that currently informs research on the topic (e.g. concepts of ‘insideness’, ‘place-referent continuity’ and the ‘mediating change function’ of place-identity). The textual analyses offered in the latter stages of the study should be regarded as exploratory. They are intended merely to illustrate some of the differences between discursive and mainstream perspectives, and the task of empirically grounding a discursive psychology of place identity must still be undertaken. As a social psychological enterprise, this task will necessarily involve studying the multiple cultural, historical and political contexts within which person–place relations are constituted and recognizing how, in turn, such relations may constitute those wider contexts. For example, what are the implications for the construction of place-identity of late modern tensions between globalization and localization? How do we discursively locate the self in an age characterized by rootlessness, mobility and permeability of borders, yet punctuated by sudden revivals of ‘territorialized identities’ (Gupta & Fergus, 1992; Massey & Jess, 1996)? Interestingly, these kinds of concerns are already being broached by social psychologists working in the mainstream of the discipline (e.g. Cinnirella, 1997; Echabe & Castro, 1996), even if such work has not taken place identification as a theoretical construct.

This study concludes by mentioning two concerns for the future, which discursive researchers might wish to consider. First, discursive social psychologists have inherited the discipline’s tendency to ignore the role of natural and built environments in sustaining self-definition (though see Barnes et al., 1998; Michael, 1996; Taylor & Wetherell, 1999). Many of their conceptual resources prioritize history over geography (e.g. ‘ideological tradition’) and even when spatial concepts are employed (e.g. ‘positioning’) they are used analogically, with little serious attention to their spatial implications. There is clearly a need to develop analytic tools that can address the geographic dimension of social life more directly.

Secondly, investigating place-identity may require a broader notion of textuality than that conventionally employed in discursive work, which tends to focus on conversational and written texts.6 Where the present authors would agree with Proshansky and others is that place-identity is bound up with people’s bodied transactions with material settings, including their attempts to manipulate them so as to reveal their selves. Collective identities may be concretely signalled, for example,

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6 See Barnes and Duncan (1991) for an illuminating discussion of the ways in which places and landscapes can be treated as texts.
through practices of territorial personalization (Greenbaum & Greenbaum, 1981), involving usage of architectural styles, layouts or forms of ornamentation. Moreover, as Dixon et al. (1997) recently indicated, the division between the established (those who belong) and the foreign (those who do not belong) may become embodied in the material organization of places (e.g. in the tangible form of boundaries, buffer zones and other distancing devices). Of course, the authors would insist that people’s experience of such material forms, the meanings and functions they attribute to them, are mediated by discursive practices. Even so, a discursive approach to place-identity will require forms of analysis beyond the analysis of language, particularly if the workings of power are to be exposed.

Acknowledgements

The research discussed in this paper was supported by a Prestige Scholarship awarded to the first author by the Human Science Research Council of South Africa and by a research grant awarded to the second author by the Centre for Science Development of South Africa. The authors wish to thank Stephanie Taylor and Roger Cocks for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

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Received 4 August 1998; revised version received 9 February 1999