Student Development of Campus Place Attachment

Shelby C. Allen

This article will examine the psychological process of place attachment as it applies to relationships students develop with college and university spaces. Manzo and Wright (2014) define place attachment as the bond that forms between a person and their physical surroundings. These connections inform an individual’s sense of identity, create meaning, and influence action. During their collegiate experience, many undergraduate students develop positive emotional ties to their campus, specifically those spaces in which they feel a sense of belonging. In contrast, some undergraduate students may never form an emotional bond with their campus, which can lead to feelings of loneliness or homesickness (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010). The article will explore the construction of a theory that discusses the developmental process by which students form these meaningful person-place bonds in the collegiate environment.

On any given college or university campus, students interact with numerous physical spaces that provide abundant resources committed to facilitating academic, professional, and social growth. Such spaces may include classrooms, residence halls, fitness centers, student unions, cultural centers, and athletic stadiums. As students come to know and interact with these environments, they may develop a cognitive-emotional bond to the space, a phenomenon in environmental psychology known as “place attachment” (Low & Altman, 1992). Undifferentiated space can evolve into “place” as humans come to know it better and endow it with value (Manzo, 2003). Individuals who are able to form these positive place attachments may experience numerous psychological benefits from the attachment, including a sense of belonging as well as relief from stress or anxiety (Scannell & Gifford, 2015). In particular, students in their first year may have difficulty forming attachments as they navigate the process of seeking out spaces in which to belong. As documented by Sun, Hagedorn and Zhang (2016), first year college students may experience a sense of displacement owing to the abrupt shift from their previous familiar environments. This shift, coupled with increased social and academic demands, can lead students to experience increased stress and anxiety. Developing positive affective bonds with campus space may assist these students in finding relief.

To date, there is very little literature on the developmental process by which individuals form attachments to place. Morgan (2010) theorized that person-to-place bonding develops in a similar manner as person-to-person bonding, but more research is needed to support this idea. Further, the existing literature on place attachment has not extended to include campus and university spaces. Throughout the literature, place attachment most often pertain to residential places, such as childhood homes (Manzo, 2003).

To address this gap in the literature, this report proposes the construction of a new theory, entitled Development of Campus Place Attachment, that adapts the theory of place attachment as it applies to college and university spaces. Then, the theory of place attachment is integrated with Marcia’s existing psychosocial theory of ego identity statuses to understand how students resolve crisis through attachment to campus space (Marcia, 1966). The proposed theory
is constructed within the context of Bronfenbrenner’s (1981) ecological model as it is adapted for the post-secondary environment (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

**Literature Review**

It is important to emphasize that within higher education and student affairs literature, there is minimal research that exists to describe the relationships students form with physical spaces. Although place attachment has been applied to study in a variety of disciplines such as urban planning, resource management, and social housing policy, the theory has not yet made its way into student development scholarship (Manzo & Wright, 2014). The following section will review select studies on place attachment, including Seamon’s (2014) six-place process, Morgan’s (2010) developmental theory, and Scannell and Gifford’s (2017) research on benefits of place attachment as well as Bronfenbrenner’s (1981) ecological model and Marcia’s (1966) ego identity statuses.

**Place Attachment and Identity**

Relationships between person and place are an ever-changing, dynamic phenomenon. An individual’s relationship to place can encompass a broad range of physical settings and emotions, are both unconscious and conscious, and exist within a larger socio-political milieu (Manzo, 2003). Place attachments are dynamic and fluid rather than static, as they can shift and evolve over a lifespan. Further, attachment to place is sustained by regular environmental actions and routines which, when maintained, strengthen the attachment (Seamon, 2014).

Seamon (2014) contributes to the literature by presenting a phenomenological framework of six interconnected processes that contribute to the emotional bonds with place. In this model, the first four processes describe what places are and how they work. **Place interaction** refers to the typical happenings in a place over time while **place identity** relates to the process by which people take up a place as a significant part of their world. **Place release** includes unexpected events that happen in a place, such as seeing an old friend, which allow an individual to release more deeply into themselves. **Place realization** is the palpable presence of a place, including its unique built and human elements. The remaining two processes explore how human effort can come to improve place. In **place creation**, human beings become active in relation to a place, advocating for creative shifts in planning, design, or policy to improve the space. Finally, **place intensification** accounts for the ways in which policy or design can strengthen place by making it better or more durable in some way. Seamon (2014) explains that in well-used and well-liked places, all six processes are typically present. A dynamic, shifting interplay of these six processes result in a robust environmental synergy. Therefore, experiencing place can result in a wide range of emotions from appreciation to deep love of place. These six place processes serve as the foundational model for the proposed theory as it relates to college and university spaces.

Scholars have also attempted to compare place attachment to the processes of interpersonal attachment, or person-to-person bonds. Morgan’s (2010) research toward a developmental model of place attachment presents the most comprehensive knowledge on this subject, although more research is warranted to confirm these findings. The work of John Bowlby (as cited in Morgan, 2010) explains person-to-person bonds as a basic part of human nature. Feelings of distress experienced by young children who are separated from parental
caregivers trigger attachment behaviors. Morgan (2010) uses this information to propose a model that explains how place attachment may develop in young children. In the model, as children are exposed to their physical environment, fascination or excitement is aroused, which leads them to distance themselves from their attachment figure. Through interacting with their surroundings, the child experiences pleasure as well as a sense of mastery and adventure. However, once the environment elicits anxiety or pain, the child seeks to return and be near the attachment figure. As this pattern repeats over time, it creates internal working models, or unconscious psychological structures (Morgan, 2010). Sroufe (1990) explains that these structures manifest subjectively as the long-lasting emotional bond known as love.

**Benefits of Place Attachment Bonds**

The development of a positive place attachment can lead to numerous psychological benefits for the individual. In a study by Scannell and Gifford (2017), participants expressed thirteen themes of psychological benefits of place attachment. These include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memories</th>
<th>Freedom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
<td>Practical Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Emotions</td>
<td>Privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Support</td>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort and Security</td>
<td>Connection to Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most commonly experienced benefit of place attachment, mentioned by 69% of the participants, is that attachment supports nostalgia memories. The second most commonly mentioned benefit was belonging, which was evident in 54% of responses. This benefit included feelings of “at homeness”, feeling loved, having roots in a place, as well as connecting with others. The third most commonly mentioned benefit of place attachment was stress relief, mentioned by 49% of participants. Relaxation included feelings of restoration from stress and negative affect.

Place attachment can result in individuals coming to experience an additional phenomenon known as place identity (Manzo, 2003). In place identity, individuals come to feel they are a part of the place, and the place is a part of them (Seamon, 2014). A number of studies emphasize the dynamic nature of relationships to places as part of identity development. For example, Erikson (as cited in Manzo, 2003) describes identity as a dynamic process that balances rootedness and uprootedness. Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff (1983) explain that place identity varies with the sex, age, social class, personality, and other social descriptors of the individual. Race, class, gender and sexual orientation affect an individual’s interactions with the world and can
sometimes limit those places with which individuals can connect.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that although place attachment is most often explored in positive affective terms; negative aspects of place attachment also exist. Relph (as cited in Manzo, 2003) points out that relationship to places may not always be positive, as sometimes affection or tophophilia for particular places are paralleled by an aversion, or topophobia for other places that feel oppressive. This ideal is integrated into the proposed theory through the inclusion of a detachment stage, at which point individuals break their bonds with a campus or university space.

**Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model**

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1981) ecological research explains the process by which human development occurs. Bronfenbrenner proposed a four-part theory comprising process, person, context, and time (Figure 1). The first component *process* represents particular forms of interaction between organism and environment that should be increasingly complex as the individual progresses. Next, the *person* component encompasses instigative behaviors and characteristics of an individual’s personality that influence how a person will respond to the environment. The *context* component represents nested system of levels where the work of development occurs. These levels include a person’s microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The last component, *time*, includes three levels including *microt ime* (minutes), *mestotime* (days/weeks) and *macrot ime* (lifespan). As these four components interact, they manifest a developmental environment for the individual.

Renn and Arnold (2003) created a model of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model as it applies to students in postsecondary environments. This model shows the various components that exert influence on a student’s development, such as their peer group, their roommate, institutional policy, or their cultural values (Figure 1, Renn & Arnold, 2003).

**Marcia’s Ego Identity Statuses**

Marcia’s (1966) ego identity statuses present the psychosocial process by which young adults experience and resolve crisis through exploration and commitment. *Exploration* occurs when young adults question formerly held values or goals defined by authority figures by exploring alternatives. This can be an exciting process, but if anxiety occurs, adults look for resolution. *Commitment* occurs when the individual makes a choice to move in a direction different from the authority figure or revert to the former pattern. Marcia (1966) describes this process as occurring in four states, which are not permanent.

In the first status, *foreclosure*, individuals experience few crises and authorities direct their path. Individuals are hesitant to go in a direction different from the authorities in their lives. In the second status, *moratorium*, individuals start the exploration process by beginning to question existing authorities and grapple between resistance and conforming. During the status of *identity achievement*, typically following an extensive period of crisis, individuals consider alternatives and make choices that lead to strong commitments. Finally, *diffusion* occurs when individuals refuse or are unable to commit, or have not experienced significant crisis. If individuals experience diffusion, they will continue to submit to external authority. These developmental stages provide the theoretical foundation for student’s interactions between existing place attachments and the development of attachments to college and university space.
Development of Campus Place Attachment

An adaptation of place attachment can be useful to address how college students create emotional bonds to specific spaces on their campus. As Manzo (2003) points out, we do not yet know how other places can inform one’s sense of self, as the current place attachment literature traditionally examines individual’s relationship to their neighborhood or the space they consider to be home. The proposed theory, Development of Campus Place Attachment, combines the elements of Seamon’s (2014) six-place process model and Morgan’s (2010) developmental model with Marcia’s ego identity statuses (1966). Seamon’s (2014) model is used as a framework to understand how a student’s relationship with campus place changes as their development occurs, while Marcia’s statuses are incorporated to show how students resolve crisis in the new environment by way of exploration and commitment. The theory is situated in the context of Renn and Arnold’s (2003) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s (1981) ecological model for postsecondary environments, as campus place attachments can develop as a result of a variety of environmental influences, such as a student’s peer group, parents, or religious affiliation. Campus attachments can also vary on the geographical scale, such as attachment to an individual classroom, a student union, or a large outdoor space.

Proposed Statuses

The theory proposes how students upon entering the college or university environment, release existing place and authority attachments to allow new attachments to form. While presented in a distinct order towards the development of campus place attachment, the statuses of the proposed theory may operate simultaneously for multiple places and are flexible to allow for variance in individual student experience. Additionally, while the status labeled as departure, or non-attachment to place, is presented at the end of the model, it is important to note this can occur at several points along the student’s developmental process as they interact with the environment.

In the first status, known as unattached, students operate under and depend upon existing attachments to places that hold an affective significance in their lives, such as their country of origin, former residence, or high school. The student is unaware of the campus space and operates in a routine absent from it. The student experiences little to no crisis that would push them towards developing a new attachment. Students who never develop affective attachment bonds to their campus remain in this status for the duration of their time at the college or university.

A student moves into the second status, place exposure, as they become cognitively aware of the campus space through a variety of means. This can happen through processes such as the reading of reference or online materials, verbal descriptions and storytelling from others, or by way of intentional or spontaneous physical interaction with the campus space. It is important to note that this status can be experienced prior to or after the student’s arrival to the college or university setting. It is unlikely that a student would not be cognitively exposed to at least some campus spaces, such the town in which the campus is located prior to their arrival, but these may not yet serve as places of attachment. The student may have an inclination towards interest or disinterest towards the space, but a bond is not present.
During the third status, place exploration, the student has sensory rich experiences within the space and comes to understand its distinct features. The student also begins to understand the norms and behaviors associated with the space, as well as any other individuals who may have a relationship to the space. A student experiences fascination or excitement in this status, and may seek to gain mastery of a space, similar to Morgan’s (2010) model. This also mirrors the moratorium status in Marcia’s (1966) model, as students start to question their former attachments. While emotions towards the place may be present in this status, an attachment bond has not yet formed.

The next step toward developing an attachment bond is routinization. During this status, the student makes conscious decisions over time to revisit the space, either at their leisure or by way of necessity to complete a goal or objective, such as attendance in a classroom space. The student develops expectations about the space and their understanding becomes detailed and nuanced. The student evaluates their relationships within the environment for personal benefit or value. The space is integrated into the student’s routine. Students strengthen their internal working models with each repeated visit to the space (Morgan, 2010).

Place intensification occurs when various experiences over time, whether positive or negative, lead the student to experience and understand the place’s effect on their emotions. The student weighs the value and benefit of the campus space against other held place attachments. A student may also have a significant emotional experience in the space, which can accelerate them towards attachment or departure. In this status, students may identify the place as a means to resolve crisis, such as loneliness, anxiety or homesickness.

In the final status, campus place attachment, the student forms or refuses a committed, affective towards the space. Strong positive emotions lead the student shift their view of space to one of “place.” The student will also likely experience a range of psychological benefits from attachment to the place such as a sense of belonging (Scannell & Gifford, 2017). The student may begin to converse about the space or desire to share it with others. Students may also develop place identity during attachment—seeing the space as part of them, and themselves as part of the space (Seamon, 2014). In departure, students do not form a commitment to attachment to campus space and instead rely on previous place attachments to bring comfort, security, or freedom. This mirrors the foreclosure identity status. Figure 2 depicts the statutes in their sequential order.

Implications for Student Affairs Practice

Considering the theory of place attachment is absent in the higher education and student affairs literature, further scholarly research should be conducted to evaluate if the phenomenon applies to students and campus spaces. This research could include the variety of ways in which students explore their campus spaces, as well as methods to map and assess campus spaces for their value in student’s daily routines. Professionally, this type of research could bolster the evidence for the value the work student affairs professionals do in creating and sustaining environments that help students develop a sense of belonging, especially in the functional area of housing and residence life. Other functional areas that could benefit from this research include student unions, outdoor and recreational programs, campus facilities and
events, as well as campus administration. There is a clear need to understand if and how campus place attachment affects student success and retention within resident, commuter and international populations.

Practically, student affairs professionals should possess a baseline understanding of campus place attachment to assist students, especially incoming students, with the navigation of a new physical environment. This will assist professionals in understanding student attitudes and behaviors as they relate to place attachment, such as a student who consistently returns to their hometown on the weekend. For many students, especially those of traditional age and status, college is the first time in which they are in a completely new and often unfamiliar environment. This process of adjustment can lead to stress, anxiety, or homesickness unless the student is able to find a safe haven or other method of emotional relief. Professionals should encourage students who are experiencing a difficult transition or are in crisis to find spaces on campus to help alleviate this stress. Encouraging repetitive engagement with campus spaces can benefit the growth and development of students.

Fried (as cited in Manzo, 2003) notes that safe havens can be particularly important for marginalized groups and individuals who cope with numerous stressors. Further, Oldenburg (1999) describes the significance of informal meeting places, such as cafes and pubs in people’s lives. Therefore, it is important for professionals to recognize the importance of non-university affiliated spaces that spur attachment through alleviating stress such as local parks, restaurants, or bars and nightlife near campus. Additionally, student affairs professionals should work to create physical spaces that are inviting, safe, and appealing for students, as spaces where student affairs professionals’ work can serve as attachment sites. Student affairs professionals can also advocate for campus renovations to redesign spaces that students neglect. In redesigning these spaces, a practical solution is to allow student groups to contribute to the built environment in some way such as custom artworks, engraved stones, or other personalized touches. Control is a key determinant of environmental satisfaction that relates to a variety of important personal outcomes including productivity, health and well-being (Scannell & Gifford, 2017).

A final implication for the work of student affairs as it relates to campus place attachment is the consideration of campus space as “home” for students. Colleges and universities often use language related to “home” in describing campus spaces to market their services and experiences. For example, on the landing page of the Indiana University Purdue University - Indianapolis campus center website is the tagline: “Consider this your home base while at IUPUI” (Indiana University, 2018). Manzo (2003) notes, “When we use the term “home” to capture the essence of an experience in places, we are using a metaphor that views the residence as the archetypal landscape to which other landscapes are compared.” (p. 49). Using the term “home” in the campus environment may prompt students to distance themselves from former notions of “home” to which they are attached, and instead attach to the campus space as their new “home.” Seamon (1979) defines “at-homeness” as “the usually unnoticed, taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable in, and familiar with, the everyday world in which one lives, and outside of which one is visiting” (p. 70). However, it is important for campuses to consider the connotations “home” may have for some students. Marcus (1995) developed twin themes of “home as haven” and “home as trap” to
capture how some relationships to the
residence involved painful memories and the
replaying of unpleasant dynamics. Student
affairs professionals should consider this
when actively promoting the campus as a
student’s home.

In summary, all of the above
academic as well as practical implications
are important to consider in the context of
this article as well as the future work of
student affairs professionals. As
professionals come to understand the
relationships students are forming, or not
forming with their campus environments,
they gain a deeper understanding of the
values and behaviors of the student. By
encouraging positive person-place bonds
with campus environments, student affairs
professionals can assist students in their
search for meaning and belonging, as well as
inspire a deep love of place for their college
or university.

Shelby C. Allen is a first-year master’s student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs
program at Indiana University Bloomington. Shelby is committed to holistic student growth and
well-being, and her future career interests include Student Leadership Programs, Fraternity and
Sorority Life, and Orientation, Transition and Retention programs.

References

design. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from
http://ebookcentral.proquest.com
https://studentaffairs.iupui.edu/campus-center/index.html
development. In Patton, L. D., Renn, K.A., Guido F.M., & Quaye, S. J., Student
development in college: Theory, research and practice (3rd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-
Bass & Pfeiffer.
(Eds.), Place attachment (pp. 1-12). New York: Plenum Press.
Social Psychology, 3, 551-558
Newberry Port, MA: Conari Press
Manzo, L.C. (2003). Beyond house and haven: Toward a revisioning of emotional relationships
with places. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 23, 47-61.
Place attachment: Advances in theory, methods and applications. (pp. 1-6). New York: Routledge
Environmental Psychology, 30, 11-22
Environmental Psychology, 3, 57-83.

**Appendix**

*Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model*

![Bronfenbrenner’s Model as Applied to a Postsecondary Environment](image1)

*Figure 2. Development of Campus Place Attachment Model*

![Development of Campus Place Attachment Model](image2)