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'I Already Know the City, I Don't Have to Explore it': Adjustments to 'Sense of Place' for 'Local' UK University Students

Holton, Mark

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Population, Space and Place

Wiley

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**“I already know the city, I don’t have to explore it”: adjustments to 'sense of place'
for ‘local’ UK University students**

Abstract

Recent conceptualisations of place have sought to reconsider place as being the sedentary equivalent to mobility, instead recognising its dynamism and its potential for evoking powerful emotional responses. These notions hold particular resonance in the realm of higher education, with discussions emerging of the important influence place may hold for students as they progress through University. While this has been recognised from the perspective of 'mobile' students, what is less clear is how these notions of place might influence the trajectories of ‘local’ students, specifically how feelings of place disruption or identity dislocation might spill out into their non-student lives and their wider sense of ‘being’ students (or non-students) within what are often highly emotive and memory-laden places. This is important as the process of ‘re-sensing’ place through the lens of a student may challenge long established conceptions of the city for ‘local’ students.

Keywords

Students, higher education, sense of place, student geographies, student mobility, local students

Introduction

Recent discussions of place and mobility seek to explore the dynamism of place and its capacity to evoke powerful emotional responses (Butcher, 2010; Collins, 2010). These

notions hold particular resonance in the realm of higher education (HE), with discussions emerging of the influence place may hold for students as they progress through University (Holton and Riley, 2013; Holdsworth, 2009a). Chatterton (1999) highlights the ways in which students essentially ‘self-segregate’ themselves away from non-student populations in order to appropriate space in their term-time locations. Others examine how these processes of exclusion and division can be replicated in residential communities, where studentification and the seasonal influxes of students create tensions between student and non-student residents over noise, parking, litter and crime (Allinson, 2006; Sage *et al.*, 2011; 2013). Moreover, Gabriel (2006) and Wiborg (2004) suggest that students who move away from home during term-time may struggle with negotiating re-interpretations of place and identity as they move between term-time accommodation and home during vacations and upon completion of their degrees.

This paper joins these debates through a [re]examination of students’ place-making practices, switching the focus from ‘non-local students’ to those ‘local’¹ students who remain at home during studies in order to explore whether the action of attending a ‘local’ University may disrupt immobile learners’ sense of place within their term-time location. While an extensive corpus of literature exists pertaining to ‘local’ students’ struggles in fitting in among ‘non-local’ peer groups (Holdsworth, 2006); negotiating multiple ‘social’ (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) and ‘learner’ identities (Reay *et al.*, 2010); or accessing the right types of capital required to successfully progress through University (Clayton *et al.*, 2009), little is understood as to how feelings of place

¹ The terms ‘local’ and ‘non-local’ are used here to reflect Holdsworth’s (2009a) categorisations which imply that local students may be ‘of’ the city without necessarily ‘in’ the city. While all of the participants’ within this study identified with being local students, only two were living on the island itself, while some were living up to twelve miles away from campus.

disruption or identity dislocation might spill out into their non-student lives and their wider sense of 'being' students (or non-students) within, what may be highly emotive and memory-laden local environments.

Addressing this research lacuna will make a useful contribution to the field of student geographies by added depth to Holdsworth's (2009a) suggestion that local students may struggle with positioning their student and non-student identities and can often feel 'out of place' within term-time environments (Holdsworth, 2006; Christie, 2007). Rather than simply focusing upon the differences between 'local' and 'non-local' students, this research draws in notions of 'sense of place' to explore more fully how 'local' students' position of being both students *and* local residents can be challenged through the action of attending a 'local' institution. For instance, witnessing places with which they may have deep connections being used differently by 'non-local' students may disrupt or confuse their associations with place, while 'new' places may inadvertently become accessible which they may not necessarily have had contact with previously. Addressing these issues will also provide a valid contribution to sense of place literatures by highlighting the complexities associated with viewing sense of place through different and multiple lenses. Experiencing locations from the perspective of being both 'student' and 'resident' highlights how sense[s] of place may not necessarily layer neatly. In some ways views and feelings about places may be disturbed, while in others, individuals may be imbued with more confidence to challenge their own conceptions of place. Either way, this research highlights the dynamism of sense of place and it's capability to influence our trajectories through the life-course. This paper unpacks these notions by discussing five key themes: (1) how the action of 'becoming' University students may disrupt local students' sense of place, and (2) concerns that

treasured places can be misinterpreted by more typical students. (3) How going to University may prompt an opening up of 'new' places within the city. (4) How local knowledge may provide collateral among student peers, and (5) how local students' intricately layered sense of place may mean that their relationships with place is in contrast to their 'non-local' peers.

Placing 'local' students in context

Much of the literature on 'local' students commonly suggests that their immobility sits in direct contrast to more popular discourses of HE transitions through mobility (Holdsworth, 2009b). Such mobility has, for many, become a defining feature of attending University for UK students, whereby: "being a student is emblematic for not being from around here" (Holdsworth, 2009a, 227). Importantly, Christie (2007; 2009) and Holdsworth (2006; 2009a) have recognised some of the reasons *why* some students choose to stay at home during their studies. Christie (2007) transcends the more typical motives of financial constraints (Callender and Jackson, 2008) or the influence of parents (Pugsley, 1998) as being the main causal factors by suggesting that retaining links with local networks of friends and family are equally valid motives for staying local. Holdsworth (2006) in particular questions whether 'local' students' identities may be challenged as they attempt to 'fit in' at University and subsequently, if this may contribute towards them 'missing out' on a University experience. Importantly, Holdsworth posits that there are no right or wrong ways of going to University, suggesting instead that remaining at home may be perceived to be the right environment within which to accumulate the social capital required to maintain strong local networks, assisting in boosting employment prospects once they have graduated. Key to

these debates is the significance of the individual student's agency in making these decisions. For many of the participants of these studies, their decision *not* to try to fit in or participate in student-centric social activities was decided consciously and early on (see also: Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Clayton *et al.* (2009) add that 'local' students may need to employ a particular 'stay-at-home' strategy in order to minimise the risks associated with going to University². This enables strong connections with both the material and symbolic places associated with their neighbourhoods and communities and may provide an anchor during studies.

The agency stressed here contrasts with Crozier *et al.* (2008) and Reay *et al.* (2010) who suggest that 'local' students have somewhat disadvantaged experiences in relation to their more mobile equivalents. As well as being geographically constrained in their HE decisions, Crozier *et al.* (2008) point out that many of the 'local' students within their study spoke of University being only a single component of their lives. Clayton *et al.* (2009) add to this by suggesting that withdrawal from the student community can become exacerbated by a lack of knowledge of the benefits of HE beyond the degree. Moreover, Christie *et al.* (2005) suggest that 'local' learners can become characterised as 'day students', often by their own design which essentially marks them out as 'doing' a University degree rather than 'being' a student (Christie, 2009). Abrahams and Ingram (2013) contrast this by arguing that local students are constrained more by their class identity which can cast them adrift in the perceived 'foreign' environment of HE. However, what is lacking here is any discussion of how 'local' students might build their propinquity to home and University into being beneficial to their prospective

² As Clayton *et al.* (2009) suggest, such risks might include: "financial and emotional worries as well as social and temporal sacrifices such as disconnection from established friendship circles and time spent outside of full-time employment, alongside the dangers of entering into unfamiliar socio-spatial territory" (159).

student experience. As was suggested by Christie *et al.* (2005), not all 'local' students follow the same pathways of being disadvantaged by their immobility, meaning attention must also be given to how these students express their agency in their educational and/or social decisions.

Sense of place within student geographies

In conceptualising 'sense of place', Tuan (1977) argues that the stillness of place is vitally important in the process of forging attachment to locations. This creates a more personal and *individualised* sense of place which relies on intimate and emotional connections with environments (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). However, Pretty *et al.* (2003) suggest that: "location itself is not enough to create a sense of place. It emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place" (274). Hence, a 'sense of place' emerges from an increased depth of knowledge and association with a location, which in turn gives meaning to abstract space (Anderson, 2010). Key to this paper is Hay's (1998) notion of the temporality of sense of place and how this links to residential status. Those with limited connections to a location (e.g. tourists or transients) are likely to have a far weaker sense of place than those with more historical connections. Hay's conceptualisation is salient as it recognises the weak ties between people as they move through places. Whilst deep rooted connections with place are, of course vital for understandings of sense of place, superficial, partial or personal connections can also be significant in revealing an adapting sense of place for those who may have attachments in *other* locations, such as long/short-term migrants.

As a conceptual tool, sense of place is almost invisible within research into the geographies of students (outside of discussions of international student mobility), being

superseded by studies of mobility, transition and identity. Howley *et al.* (1996) and Pretty *et al.* (2003) argue, for example, that a disrupted sense of place may act as a *catalyst* for mobility for young adults, either into education or employment, and can be exacerbated if they become disenfranchised with their local communities. Fincher *et al.*'s (2009) study of international student experiences in Melbourne, Australia, touches on how the morphology of the student halls of residence (high density and mono-cultural) can contribute to a diminished sense of place for young international students. As Fincher and Shaw (2009) suggest, such institutionalised spaces serve to manifest and replicate mono-cultural social networks which greatly diminish the potential to forge meaningful connections both with, and outside of these spaces. Fincher and Shaw's case could of course be construed as an example of how immobility may become a product of unsuccessful mobility decisions whereby international students can feel (temporarily) 'out of place' within the context of their new learning and social environments. Nevertheless, research by Collins (2010) suggests that international students (in Collins' case South Korean students residing in New Zealand) build upon the legacy of the immigrant areas of cities in order to quickly establish their sense of place, socialising in spaces which connect with their cultural heritage. Employing these notions of the varying degrees of intensity of a sense of place may therefore assist in uncovering how undergraduate students who live at home during term-time [re]interpret the city as they negotiate their student and non-student identities Likewise, notions of a 'sense of place' may also be extended to incorporate the experiences of those local students who already have a great deal of history and knowledge of the city in order to understand whether viewing the city through the lens of being a student might challenge their established conceptions of the place.

Methodology

The data for this paper comes from a wider research project concerned with how residential circumstances may contribute towards University students' 'sense of place' in their term-time location. 'Walking interviews' were conducted with thirty one full-time, University of Portsmouth undergraduate students in the spring/summer of 2012 (Holton and Riley, 2014). Participants were recruited through a preceding survey and willing candidates were sent an invitation letter, outlining the research in more detail. Inevitably, some drop-out occurred, primarily because the interview process required a little more time than simply sitting in a room. Nevertheless, a strong and diverse sample was established. These mobile encounters provided an excellent opportunity to capture responses to the external environment 'in the moment' and assisted in overcoming some of the awkwardness of face-to-face interviews (Riley, 2010). Participants were asked to choose two to three pre-determined locations to walk between during the interview within the city which they visited regularly and felt they had an attachment to. During the interviews the students were encouraged to talk about why they chose these locations, as well as how their experiences of these locations altered before and after becoming students. The participants were given control of both the route taken through the city as well as the voice recorder, allowing them to manage and direct their journey replicating, as much as possible, 'natural', every-day encounters. The interviews were transcribed and the pertinent aspects of each encounter detailed in a field diary. Of the thirty one participants, thirteen had chosen to remain at home during their studies at the time of the interviews and comprised: eight students living with their parents and, five living in their own homes. As a study cohort, the participants were predominantly female (10), in their final year of study (6) and living with their parents (8). It is the

reflexive accounts of these students which have inspired this paper, particularly as the vast majority reflected, at length, on how their attachments to the city had adapted over the duration of their degrees and what influence this had over their student identities.

The uniqueness of the research location was important to the success of this study. University locations vary greatly in scale, density and form, making comparisons problematic. Differing levels of influence exist in students' perceptions of their own and others' identities, creating particular contexts for student life which are unique to that institution and are replicated through the relationships forged with non-student populations. As a city Portsmouth is not exceptional, however it exhibits distinctive characteristics which shape how it is experienced by its students. The UK's only island city, Portsmouth covers approximately 40km² and has a population of 197,614 with a population density of, on average 5000 people per square kilometre, making it the UK's most densely populated city by area outside of London (Portsmouth City Council (PCC), 2012). Portsmouth also has a large youth population with a third (33.6 percent) under the age of 25,³ reflecting Portsmouth's large student population (PCC, 2012)⁴.

A disrupted 'sense of place'

One of the more salient themes which cut across all of the interviews with 'local' students was how the action of 'going to University' was attached to a period of intense readjustment as they began to re-imagine familiar 'non-student' spaces differently as

³ This is three per cent higher than the national average of 30.7 percent (PCC, 2012).

⁴ The University of Portsmouth currently has 22,709 students as of 2012-13 constituting approximately eleven percent of the city's population. This is comprised of: 18,878 (83 percent) full time and 3,831 (17 percent) part time students, with 18,889 (83 percent) undergraduates and 3,217 (17 percent) postgraduates (University of Portsmouth, 2012).

students. For some of the participants, these reinterpretations challenged prior knowledges (and potentially disrupted their status as pre-existing residents) of Portsmouth as they began to ‘sense’ the city in a different way. This was noticeable during the interviews as the ‘local’ students’ deep reflections with their histories were elicited spontaneously and referred to in the context of both the past and the present. This varied in intensity and was clearly influenced by the age of the participant, with the younger students living with their parents discussing how their sense of place within Portsmouth was often linked to their childhood experiences (see: Matthews and Limb, 1999). The following extract comes from Christopher,⁵ a first year student living with his parents:

“This [Southsea Common] is somewhere I used to come to when I was younger, my parents would bring us down here as children and now when I come down here more recently as an adult, being a student here at University, I sort of look at things differently. I look at places and buildings that I remember as a child and they look different. I suppose when you’re a child you don’t look critically at stuff, you tend to just look at buildings and at places and maybe now I see them in a bigger scheme of things, understand them in time, how things have changed in Portsmouth. I’ve found myself having memories from when I was a child but being able to understand them on a different level now that I’m older”
(Christopher).

⁵ All names have been anonymised.

Christopher largely ignored my presence throughout our time on Southsea Common, walking away with the voice-recorder and appraising the landscape, both through his past 'non-student' and current 'student' lenses. Being in, and talking of, such a familiar place during the interview encouraged Christopher to question why he might re-interpret childhood spaces as an adult, but more importantly as a student. Hence, these changes became enmeshed with a sense of maturation, whereby the *re*-use of space as a student validated his independence from his parents. Contrasts evidently exist here between childhood and adult senses of place. As Matthews and Limb (1999) suggest, children, particularly adolescents, often establish a sense of place through colonising public spaces (pavements, parks shopping centres etc.) which are free, easily accessible and provide ample space to meet friends. While younger students are (mainly) only recently making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, Clara's comment below indicates that familiar spaces being used differently may act as a catalyst for her altered interpretations of the city:

"I've grown up in this place, but when I came here during Fresher's Week I was really shocked, Guildhall [Walk] was like a nightclub, loads of people around so that was really surprising yeah. During the day there's a whole other thing going on" (Clara).

This suggestion that becoming a student allowed her to access familiar spaces with new intentions adds to Howley *et al.*'s (1996) and Pretty *et al.*'s (2003) proposal that those younger residents who may feel their home town no longer compliments their evolving identities may already have factored going away for HE or employment as an opportunity to leave home. Many of the younger participants here indicated being

prepared to adapt their routines to incorporate their burgeoning ‘student’ identities rather than change the environment they were living in. In this sense they are *augmenting*, rather than *replacing* their sense of ‘being’ in their home/University location as they get older.

Alternatively, for some of the older ‘local’ students, going to University meant that incongruent associations with place manifested as they attempted to interpret the city through the ways in which they once used it as younger ‘non-students’:

“When I used to go out before I was married [...] you knew the pubs that you went to and you knew the night clubs. When I used to go night clubbing, there used to be one on the Guildhall Square and then the rest of them were down Southsea. So that’s why I don’t always connect students coming here [Gunwharf Quays] for their night clubs” (Judy).

“But I mean, we’re walking past a building site. This was a leisure centre and we used to use this. I mean obviously we’ve got Anglesea building over there but opposite this used to be a big leisure centre where we used to go swimming, stuff like that, or go for a coffee. There are buildings slowly being knocked down” (Alex).

What this shifting use of ‘places’ indicates is an understanding of an affinity for a city now gone. This is particularly so for Alex who was decidedly troubled by what turned out to be an unexpected encounter with a once cherished location. Accompanying both Judy and Alex on familiar, yet not recently used, journeys highlighted how experiences of socialising in Portsmouth are embedded in the individual histories of ‘local’ students, and can become complicated by the removal or relocation of social activities. Crucially,

these disruptions to place contrast with those of the younger students outlined earlier, primarily because their prolonged associations with their local environment meant their sense of place is more complexly 'layered'. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) highlight how familiar environments are essential in preserving mimetic place in that they provide continuity between past and future events. Hay (1998) adds that those who have grown up in an area are likely to exude a more intense historical sense of place than those with more ephemeral attachments. However, as Carter *et al.* (2007: 757) argue: "it is not possible to achieve a fixed or essentialised sense of place because 'meanings' are not static in time or space". The evidence presented here synthesises these arguments by identifying how, for the older interviewees, their deep symbolic sensing of place has been disturbed through the significant life-change of becoming students. These disruptions are enhanced by behavioural changes *and* the environmental changes implied by Carter *et al.* (2007). Piecemeal developments in Portsmouth change both the way the city is *experienced* and how it is *interpreted*, resulting in confusion due to knowledge decay in mature learners' past experiences of their home city. They appear to struggle with negotiating their *actual* sense of being in the city with that which they believe is *expected* of a more typical student. Hence, while difficulties may arise for both younger and older 'local' students in managing the rich, complexly layered detail of their student and non-student lives, the success of this may depend upon how easily they adjust their evolving sense of place to their current life-stage.

Misinterpreted spaces

In extending these notions of the complexities of a disrupted sense of place, some of the participants within this study expressed concern that their prior knowledge of the city

gave them a crisis of identity when they became students. This was articulated through a concern that the context had changed for familiar places as they were being used differently by their new student peer group (e.g. places visited with parents that are now appropriated for student-centric socialising). This was evident in Mary's response to some of the often flippant but derisory comments made about Portsmouth by her non-local student friends:

“I still feel protective over it [Portsmouth], I mean if someone slags it off I think ‘hang on, this is where I live’” (Mary).

This indicates how 'local' students may be concerned that the places they have a deep connection with may be misinterpreted or challenged by their new student peer group. In some instances, it only became apparent through the walking interviews that the participants even *noticed* students utilising spaces like Southsea Common or the seafront, implying an assumption that certain places within the city were not appropriate for students. In order to protect their fragile sense of place, many spoke of thinking carefully before introducing University colleagues into their 'local' friendship group and used these physical and social distances as barriers with which to 'protect' their interpretations of their non-student home lives. These mechanisms were employed, either due to bad past experiences, or through recognition that particular aspects of their non-student lives may be construed as different to that of their non-local peers. Importantly, this was articulated, often apologetically, in ways which suggested that the home environment might be less favourable to students:

“I haven't really [brought friends home], I mean it's difficult to get to have a pint with me anyway. I've been for a few pints in Gunwharf but

any of the other places I go are probably too far to walk for them. It's a bit more difficult" (Gary).

"I mainly socialise in an area which would mean that students would have to drive. It obviously then puts them at a disadvantage. They would have to not have a drink, and drive which, for them is probably quite a long way and an area that they don't know" (Nicole).

These difficulties were further exemplified by Hannah, who had attempted to introduce a non-student friend to her student peer group:

"I have introduced them to one friend from home and it is strange when you combine the two because they're talking about two very different worlds and there was a bit of a divide because they kept talking about University and I had to keep encouraging them to talk about other things because of my friend who didn't go to University" (Hannah).

Ultimately these coping mechanisms appear to stabilise and uncomplicate their 'sense of place' from interference from outside their social group. Hannah's failed attempt at integration, and subsequent closing off of networks to protect her non-student sense of place, adds depth to Christie's (2007) suggestion that local students maintain connections with non-student friends in order to retain continuity. Typically, most 'local' interviewees expressed stronger attachments to their home (or non-student) locations than their student-centric ones. This is unsurprising considering place often provides an anchor of shared experiences between individuals or groups (Gustafson, 2001) and those living with their parents invested considerable amounts of time into developing their 'non-student' sense of place. However, as Hannah's comments imply,

translating non-student identities into student friendship groups can become complicated as the ephemeral connections made at University may not necessarily complement the more long-term connections with 'local' friends.

'New' places?

Alongside re-interpretations of familiar places, many of the participants spoke of how going to University opened up new spaces within the city which they were not previously familiar with (e.g. campus buildings or the Students' Union):

"I didn't really know that most of them existed. I was aware of the kind of University quarters but not to this extent and how spread out it is as well. I knew it was there but not to that extent, how many people were there or how busy it was" (Stephanie).

Manzo's (2003) discussion of the dynamic relationships some people have with places offers an explanation of Stephanie's experience by suggesting these are often formed through dialectic processes whereby places are constantly rewritten in accordance with a person's notions of feeling 'in' or 'out of' place in an environment (see also: Cresswell, 1996). For the participants within this study, going to a local institution ascribed meaning to spaces which were previously considered unimportant or out of bounds:

"We didn't tend to go through the University. I mean sometimes we did, like that area outside Richmond building is a bit of a plaza really and there's plenty of space for people to mill around. And if you come out of one of those gates over there [indicates exit of Gunwharf Quays] you

come out near Richmond building. And that's really annoying if you're a runner and you're trying to get past people who are just milling around. So I tended to avoid that area" (Judy).

Manzo (2003) suggests that our relationships with places are often determined by our particular position in time and space, while Hall *et al.* (1999) suggest that youngsters' past and present experiences are delicately layered when constructing their individualised 'senses of place'. While this was evident here, there was also a sense that sense of place was created in spite of their past experiences. In the above examples, these University spaces existed in the participants' unconscious, they were aware of their existence and yet they only came to the fore once required to do so. This was evident in Debbie's discussion of the ordering of places, suggesting certain locations did not necessarily hold precedence forever and could be superseded by other places which were more relevant to informing her current sense of self:

"I would never have come to Southsea with my parents, we would always have gone to Hayling or the Witterings. [...] I obviously know the housing aspect of Southsea and Fratton more now. Where my friends live I had no idea it was so studenty [sic], no idea whatsoever, obviously I can negotiate my way around the main Fawcett Road area. I think I've gone to Commercial Road less since coming to Uni [sic], I think because I'm here for Uni [sic] and I also work in Gunwharf I just don't want to spend any more time, I'd rather go to Chichester shopping, somewhere else" (Debbie).

Likewise, this layering of place extends to incorporating positive and negative experiences of place into these students' individual biographies. As Manzo (2005) suggests, incorporating both positive and negative accounts into life-experiences are essential in propelling individuals forward, particularly as negative experiences may underscore a more positive outcome. Hence, for some of the respondents, drawing upon their wealth of knowledge of the city (good or bad) armed them with the right tools with which to adapt their sense of place to suit their hybridised identities.

Local knowledge as collateral

While feelings of vulnerability were common among the participants, many of the younger students spoke of utilising pre-existing knowledge of the city as leverage to 'fit in' among their non-local student peer group:

“A lot of people spoke to me about their ideas when we had to submit our drafts for dissertations, someone was doing something on Gunwharf and they spoke to me quite a lot about that. [We had] two group projects which were walking tours of Portsmouth and my groups were quite happy that I ended up in their group because I wasn't looking at buildings for the first time. I had more information there so I think they benefitted quite well from that” (Nicole).

This contrasts with Holdsworth's (2009a) claim that “local knowledge is not necessarily valid in the student community” (235). As Holdsworth states, non-local students are likely to desire specific student-centric infrastructure and be less interested in non-student based cultural activities. However, rather than long-term residents' relationships with place being individualised (Hay, 1998), utilising local knowledge as a device to

access capital can give ‘local’ students status within their peer group. This was apparent among the participants as such knowledge often resulted in introductions to social networks with non-local students. These notions of passing on knowledge to ‘outsiders’ adds to discussions of sense of place, such as those of Bird (2002) who argues that local knowledges, in Bird’s instances, local folklore, can be inclusive for those within a particular social network, yet disempowering for those who are classed as outsider. In the context of the interviewees, their status as ‘local’ puts them in the minority among their more typical peer group. However if positioned correctly, such knowledge can provide local students with a degree of influence over their friends’ behaviours:

“Tiger’s student night is on a Monday but on a Thursday they’d all go to Liquid and I despise that. In second year I recommended we go to Tiger on a Thursday night because that’s when I go and it’s my favourite night and they’ve started doing that now and they’re more welcoming to it. At first they were like ‘why would we do that?’ It just mixes it up a little, although it’s the same place there’s a lot of different people for the University people because obviously there are a lot of the home people that go on a Thursday” (Debbie).

Nevertheless, while the above examples demonstrate how ‘local’ students might exploit their sense of place within the city, utilising local knowledge as capital can pose certain risks, particularly as interpretations of place for ‘local’ students are unlikely to match those of their non-local friends. In managing these discrepancies, the participants spoke of considering carefully how they might operationalise knowledge, who might be the

desired beneficiaries, and how their advice might best be tailored to suit the interests of their non-local peers.

Alternatively, while many suggested that their past experiences and prior knowledge acted as a useful means for establishing position within the student cohort, there was also recognition that such knowledge could also disrupt their friendship groups as past experiences may prejudice their view of certain activities and behaviours. This prevented some from immersing fully within this new 'student' version of the city they were presented with:

“I think sometimes [my local knowledge] works as a bit of a barrier because it's very different, like my friends would sometimes say about when they'd leave somewhere really late at night and go home to Fratton at two or three a.m. and I'd be like 'oh my god, what are you doing?' and they think that because it's where they've lived they see it being very safe, and it probably is safe, but you get these notions when you've lived somewhere of where's safe and where isn't. And I think, they haven't said it's quite annoying but I think when they mention somewhere nice I'll be like 'yeah, I've been there, I've done that' and I have to remember that this is a new city to them and to let them talk about it” (Hannah).

“If I was going out in Portsmouth when I was younger I would go out in the Albert Road area rather than the Gunwharf area. [In Albert Road] you could go out in whatever you wanted and no-one really cared whereas if you go out on the other side of town it's a bit posey [sic] and

Gunwharf is like a meat market and I've never really been that kind of, well it's a bit ghastly. That's an awful thing to say isn't it?" (Stephanie).

As these comments imply, individuals can attribute different meanings to the same place depending on their relationship with it (Kianicka *et al.*, 2006). However, these examples highlight how the functionality of term-time location relates back to past experiences of using it. Importantly, this is not expressed as a positive reflection, both Hannah's and Stephanie's memories of place expose certain connotations which may be attached to locations, in this sense concerns over safety and security and taste and fashion, through associative positive and negative experiences. Hence, these participants' changing relationship with their home environment has challenged their interpretations of it. While Manzo (2005) talks of legitimately recognising negative senses of place, these experiences demonstrate that they were unable to see beyond these negative connotations, exposing the idea that their construction of certain parts of the city potentially clouded their judgement about its reality.

A mimetic 'sense of place'

As the previous sections suggested, the action of going to University potentially disrupted these participants' associations with place, either through changed uses or the opening up of 'new' spaces which challenged their preconceived notions of place. Incorporating discussions of place as a mimetic space adds to these debates by suggesting that deep connections with place may mean that the city may become almost invisible to those with a historical sense of place. This was evident during the walking interviews with the 'local' students coming across as far less self-conscious about their placement within the environment and the routes they took between locations than their

non-local peers who required constant reassurance over whether the route they were taken was acceptable. From a methodological perspective, this meant that the 'local' participants were more relaxed and forthcoming with responses but were far less aware of the qualities of the environment itself. This was evident in some of the responses:

“We went up to Copnor the other day for some dinner and they were like ‘oh, wow, we haven’t seen this place’ and they were quite shocked looking around and stuff whereas I couldn’t see what the fascination was with the place, it just looked like any other road in Portsmouth whereas to them they were like ‘this is a nice part, I’ve never been to this part’, they really do seem to notice it whereas I’m like ‘oh, this is just like the end of the beach’, I find it quite strange” (Mary).

“I already know the city, I don’t have to explore it. I know where the good shops are and I know where the good takeaways are and I know which pubs to avoid and which pubs are the best ones to go to, even though I don’t go to them very often” (Eleanor).

This apparent cynicism appears to contrast with much of the literature which link place-attachment with an increased desirability towards a location (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). What these students may be experiencing here is a more complex process of reflection than their 'non-local' student friends, suggesting that memories, or sense of place, are much more easily re-written for the ephemeral, non-local undergraduate, particularly as they are less likely to have such intricately layered histories with their term-time location. Interpreting the city as commonplace or 'always there' may well be a product of its repetitive banality, however, it may also be an indication that their non-

local peers' interpretations of the city may encourage some reflection of their own, seemingly fixed, identities. This adds to Wiborg's (2004) suggestion that those who move away from home for extended periods may experience reconnections with their home locations as the time and distance spent away enables greater opportunities for reflection. For Mary and Eleanor, staying at home meant that the meaning and symbolism attached to these places became normalised, yet this 'normality' was challenged by exposure to others' experiences emphasising subtle incongruities in how 'sense of place' may be interpreted.

Conclusion

Investigating students' sense of place adds to discussions of student geographies by exposing differing motivations for integration within relative student communities. In a perfect scenario, a stronger sense of place ensures that students become more confident with their surroundings, resulting in a greater potential for 'fitting in' among peers. However, as this study has shown, in reality, a more complex and challenging process of renegotiation and reinterpretation of self and location exists which, for the students here, meant that places were regularly re-examined as different meanings were ascribed to them. This adds to previous conceptualisations of sense of place by highlighting the complex ways in which those who already have (an often detailed) prior knowledge of a location essentially 're-sense' place within it once they become students. Viewing certain memory-laden locations through a student lens caused confusion for many of the participants, ascribing them new meanings which did not previously seem suitable for students. Alternatively, others embraced this opportunity for change, using prior knowledge of the city as a way of acquiring access to the more traditional student

community. Either way, it was clear that these students' sense of place had become complicated by their being (or becoming) students and often resulting in a re-ordering of places which had meaning to them according to their new student identities. This is important as 'local' students appear to be fairly uniquely placed in that they are physically rooted to their home location, yet by becoming students are experiencing many of the same social transformations as their more mobile peers.

Moreover, this research highlights the importance of recognising that place can be intricately layered for 'local' students, meaning spaces may be used in ways which challenge perceptions and preconceptions of familiar 'local' environments. This was most keenly felt by those living with parents who felt that their sense of place within the city had been disrupted by going to University as their contrasting friendship groups meant they often occupied the margins between being a student and a non-student, experiencing places inconsistently or at times deemed inappropriate for their identities. This extends discussions which imply that 'local' students remain local in order to minimise risk and maintain continuity with non-student peers and spaces (Christie, 2007). While a sense of place can be adaptive and strengthen over time, going to University may provide access to new, unfamiliar or previously prohibited locations within the city which might challenge 'local' students' 'consistent' geographies of their home environment.

From a methodological perspective, the research also revealed how places may take on multiple and contrasting meanings for 'local' participants, affecting their 'sensing of place' *during* mobile interviewing. This was evident in how prior understandings of place were challenged 'in the field' through unexpected interactions with spaces,

processes or people which complicated interpretations of sense of place. Methodologically, while this provided added depth and texture to these encounters with place, these shifting interpretations by the participants mean experiences may not necessarily layer neatly and may disturb their views or feelings about places. The layering of knowledge therefore presents some interesting methodological challenges, particularly in moving beyond the extraordinary to focus upon how the participants made sense of more mundane spaces and activities which may not immediately be considered as important. Crucially, these research encounters with 'local' students have highlighted how participants' understandings of place are being constantly rewritten. Hence experiencing these reinterpretations alongside the participant provides a unique opportunity to unpack these experiences in situ.

Finally, future research in this area may present opportunities to add to recent discussions of student migration patterns (Sage et al., 2013) by suggesting that 'local' students may face longer-term challenges to their sense of place which extend beyond the completion of the degree. Further investigation may reveal differences in how sense of place is again [re]interpreted by non-local and 'local' students once they have graduated. While non-local students may couch their sense of place within the timeframe of the degree, 'local' students may find it difficult to replace their non-student sense of place within a city which has taken on new (and potentially redundant) sense of place, particularly if their identities do not easily transpose into these non-student spheres. Hence, this notion of 're-sensing' place adds to wider debates of sense of place, particularly previous claims that sense of place can be adaptive and strengthen over time by suggesting that key events, like going to University, have the potential to disrupt individuals' status as pre-existing residents, for better or for worse.

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