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Adapting relationships with place: Investigating the evolving place attachment and ‘sense of place’ of UK higher education students during a period of intense transition

Abstract:

In recent years interest has emerged regarding the geographies of higher education students, particularly in patterns of mobility and dispersion. While anecdotal rhetoric suggests a ‘typical student’ exists within UK institutions, what resonates is the notion that students are inherently heterogeneous, experiencing University in differing ways and times according to their circumstances and year of study. This paper uses ‘walking interviews’ conducted with University of Portsmouth students as a way of unpacking in more detail how ‘non-local’ students might go about interpreting their sense of place within their term-time location. This methodology was designed specifically to ensure discussions of ‘sense of place’ remain directly in the context of the city and recognises the adaptive relationships students have with their term-time locations. This is important as there is a tendency within the literature to focus solely on the transition into University, ignoring that students often experience pressures *throughout* their degree pathway. These pressures can be linked to various social and spatial changes, such as insecurities regarding fitting in amongst unfamiliar peer groups or a lack of confidence concerning engagement with academic and non-academic practices, and draws attention to the non-linearity of students’ associations with their term-time location.

Keywords:

Higher education; place attachment; sense of place; studentification; University students

1- Introduction

Over a decade ago, in the pages of this journal, Chatterton (1999) outlined how the social behaviours of UK undergraduate students were altering urban landscapes through their exclusive uses of social spaces in their term-time locations. Since then a broad and diverse corpus of literature has emerged regarding the geographies of higher education (HE) students, from student [im]mobility (Duke-Williams, 2009; Holdsworth, 2009b; Christie, 2007; Smith and Sage, 2014) to the impacts of studentification¹ on neighbourhoods (Munro and Livingston, 2011; Sage et al., 2012) and wider urban networks (Smith and Holt, 2007; Smith, 2009; Chatterton, 2010). What cuts across this corpus of literature is a clear message that students are a heterogeneous group who experience their time at University in differing ways. At the point of entry into University, students are often introduced to typically ‘adult’ behaviours, such as unsupervised night-time socialising, over which they have a great deal of control in *how* and they wish to experience these behaviours and *who with*. As Chow and Healey (2008) suggest, the relationships first year undergraduates begin to establish with[in] their term-time location are often experienced intensely, particularly during the initial terms of the first year. What is less clear however, is how these relationships with[in] University locations may change, and how such changes may also begin to both shape and challenge students’ identities, particularly as the heterogeneity of University students may contribute towards [un]successful interactions and experiences during term-time (Read et al., 2003).

To place the UK’s HE structure in context, since Chatterton’s (1999) study UK student numbers have increased from 1,918,970 in 1999 to 2,496,645 in 2011 (HESA, 2013). As well as significantly enlarged learner numbers there has also been a noticeably increased diversity in the trajectories students take into HE. Students are electing to remain at home during their studies (Holdsworth, 2009b), and seek alternative ways of gaining qualifications through

¹Smith (2005) defines studentification as the growing concentrations of students within locations adjacent to Universities, often being accommodated within houses in multiple occupation (HMO).

distance learning, degree courses through further education colleges or through on-the-job training schemes, adding more diffuse interpretations of approaching University (Holton and Riley, 2013). Such diversity, through policy initiatives such as widening participation targets, aimed at facilitating greater opportunities for access to HE for those not previously considered eligible to go to University, have exposed the potential for uneven geographies within HE (Holdsworth, 2009b; Mangan *et al.*, 2010) which, with the introduction of the ‘new student’² (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003), has encouraged much greater social and geographical diversity within the student body than in previous decades.

Nevertheless, despite this increased diversity there still remains a distinct trend for ‘going away’ to University, with “being a ‘student’ [being] emblematic for ‘not being from around here’” (Holdsworth, 2009a, p.227). As Holdsworth (2009b) suggests, student mobility remains a vital process which is responsible for changes to the social fabric and built environment of University towns and cities, such as improvements to housing stock, service provision and infrastructure, which often transcend the student community itself (Universities UK, 2005). As Chatterton and Hollands (2003) point out, this has led to complex forms of commodification within University towns and cities whereby students are increasingly viewed as powerful commodifiers, or ‘apprentice gentrifiers’ (Smith and Holt, 2007). Chatterton and Hollands refer to this as ‘studentland’ whereby the ‘student pound’ draws businesses and services into neighbourhoods which would otherwise not have come. However, as Kenyon (1997) cautions, these may only provide secondary benefits to non-student residents as studentified spaces are ultimately for the benefit of the student in order to assist them with developing their ‘University experience’.

² Christie (2007) defines the ‘new student’ as first generation University attendees from working class or minority backgrounds – whose limited knowledge of the inner workings of HE mean they can often experience much greater difficulties in ‘fitting in’ at University.

In moving these debates forward, while considerable attention has been given to how tertiary students manage their transitions through University, little is understood about how they establish any type of attachment or ‘sense of place’ within their term-time University location. This is important as students generally expect University spaces to provide comparable safety, security and identity to home (Chow and Healey, 2008) in order to minimise homesickness (Scopelitti and Tiberio, 2010) and prevent withdrawal from studies (Wilcox et al., 2006). However, while Chow and Healey (2008) tackle the complex process of establishing place attachment during the initial period of transition into the first year of study, there is very little indication as to how processes, such as accommodation change or adjustments to social and/or friendship groups might instigate subsequent adaptations to understandings of place as undergraduates make their move from being freshers³ into subsequent year groups. This is particularly pertinent as positive relationships with place may be fundamental for successful transitions for those who are [temporarily] mobile (Gustafson, 2001). In advancing these notions of student mobility, this paper will incorporate discussions of place attachment and ‘sense of place’ into debates of the geographies of students in order to gain a clearer understanding of how positive relationships with place may go some way in facilitating smoother transitions through University.

2- ‘Sense of place’ in transition

Place attachment or a ‘sense of place’ is often couched within the context of rootedness whereby close, long-term relationships become reliant on intimate and emotional connections with place (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001; Anderson, 2010). As Pretty et al. (2003) indicate: “location itself is not enough to create a sense of place. It emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place” (p.274). Hay (1998) suggests that there exists a

³ ‘Fresher’ or ‘freshman’ derives from the British or American term for a first year University student.

temporality to this process which is linked to residential status. Those with a limited connection with a location (e.g. tourists or transients) will have a weaker sense of place than those with ancestral connections. Hay's conceptualisation of a 'sense of place' therefore recognises that weak ties exist for people who move through places. Whilst it is important to focus upon the deep rooted connections with place, superficial, partial or personal connections can also reveal a burgeoning sense of place for those who may have attachments in other locations. While Hay's model focuses upon the temporality of place as an indicator of the intensity of a sense of place, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) draw identity into this debate, suggesting linkages between place attachment and a positive evaluation of place. This model identifies varying degrees of attachment to place (both positive and negative) which can exist among long-term residents. Likewise, Scannell and Gifford's (2010) multidimensional framework identifies place attachment as a product of the relationship between person, place and process. Common among these conceptualisations is the notion that sense of place is heterogeneous and contains characteristics which denote particularly individualised identifications with place.

Key to the development of this paper is Gustafson's (2001) theorisations of the relationships between place attachment and mobility. Place and mobility have traditionally been described in opposition with one another. As Cresswell (2006) posits, place is considered the sedentary equivalent to the more dynamic mobility, while Tuan (1977) argues that the stillness of place is crucial in the development of an attachment to place. What this essentially proposes is that those who are mobile are less likely to achieve a sense of 'belonging' in the particular place they are temporarily residing. More contemporary readings of place and mobility recognise the dynamism of place and how its adaptive and transformative capabilities may be influential in creating multiple senses of place for those in transition (Butcher, 2010; Holton, 2014). As Gustafson (2001) suggests, place attachment and mobility need not necessarily be

considered separate entities but instead may be read as complimentary processes. Those who are mobile may be just as likely to wish to replicate the connections they had with previous locations (being neighbourly or part of the local community etc.) when they move into a new area. Likewise, place can provide a secure anchor upon which those who are mobile can depend on as they travel back and forth. These linkages of place and mobility have been made most explicitly in discussions of diaspora and transnationalism. As Butcher (2010) stresses, these connections become particularly important for those who are in a state of flux as the stability gained from re-placing home assists in the attachment to a new and unfamiliar location. For example, research by Collins (2010) suggests that international students (in Collins' case South Korean HE students residing in New Zealand) may 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. Hence, it is vital to recognise the relationships between how people make sense of their everyday experiences and where these experiences take place.

In turning attention to the transitions experienced by undergraduate students, Palmer et al. (2009) suggest that the period between home and University constitutes an 'in-between-ness' or 'betwixt space', a fragile and emotional space whereby transitional students are learning to 'become' their future selves. Chow and Healey (2008) contextualise this through an examination of the ways in which first year students begin to establish place attachment whilst at University, specifically at this initial point of transition. While their findings may suggest that attachments to people are more important to students than place itself – their participants spoke of homesickness in relation to family and friends and not necessarily the location – there is an implied sense that University can represent a fresh start for young adults. As Holdsworth (2009a) argues, such mobilities are essential in forging connections with place and establishing an overall sense of belonging within a term-time location. In

contrast, Easthope and Gabriel (2008) suggest that going away to University can be representative of a 'between homes' identity, whereby:

“[...] an individual's identity is [...] intricately tied to complicated relationships between mobility and place attachment and, in particular, through their changing relationships with the place(s) they call home” (p.174).

Holdsworth (2006) adds that while leaving home for University is thought to be crucial in developing a young person's identity, how students adapt to their new environment is more important than whether they fit in immediately. These shifting relationships can be partly attributed to changes in young adults' identities through the acquisition of new forms of cultural capital, meaning the action of going to University sets into motion the journey to 'becoming' middle-class for many students (Reay, 2001). These changes can be projected as embodied cultural capital through their attire, demeanour and self-confidence (Reay et al., 2010) and can be tied into notions that leaving home for University is the 'right' thing to do (Holdsworth, 2006).

Moreover, this can be detrimental to some students, particularly as the identities formed through the acquisition of such capital may not easily translate back into the home environment (Gabriel, 2006). Nevertheless, what is clear is that there is a paucity of knowledge regarding whether these identity changes have any direct influence over the ways in which students develop their attachment to place and how this might impact upon their overall 'student experience' – however, it may be difficult to pinpoint exactly what is meant by the 'student experience'. Holdsworth (2009b) implies that the student experience is something which is perceptible and accessible *only* through mobility. Those who are thought to be 'immobile' are, by default, likely to miss out on the full benefit such experiences may grant them. Hence, rather than discussing how students sense place, there appears to be a

greater propensity for criticising students for *not* forming any attachment to their University location and for focusing on their time at University as being a transitional state (Kenyon, 1997). This paper will explore these notions of term-time sense of place and place attachment by (1) examining how first year spaces are often ideological representations of place for freshers; (2) observing the limitations of geographical knowledge brought about by living in halls and (3) discussing changing relationships with place as students move into second and third year residences.

3- Methodology

The data for this paper were taken from a wider research project concerned with how undergraduate students establish and manage their ‘sense of place’ in their term-time location. In all, thirty one ‘walking interviews’ were conducted with full-time, University of Portsmouth undergraduate students between January and May 2012⁴. Walking interviews were chosen as they 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 (Holton and Riley, 2014). Participants were asked to choose two to three pre-determined locations to walk between during the interview which reflected their attachment to their term-time location. The routes between these locations were kept fluid, meaning the participant remained in control of where they wanted to walk. This replicated, as much as possible, ‘natural’, every-day journeys (Kusenbach, 2003; Riley, 2010). The interviews were transcribed and the pertinent aspects of each encounter were detailed in a

⁴ The UK’s only island city, Portsmouth covers approximately forty square kilometres 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 has a large youth population (33.6 per cent are under the age of 25) which is three per cent higher than the national average of 30.7 per cent and is reflective of Portsmouth’s large student body (PCC, 2012). At the time of the study (2011-12), the University of Portsmouth had 22,709 students, constituting approximately eleven percent of the city’s population.

separate field diary which has been used as part of this analysis to contextualise the encounters. Of the thirty one participants, twenty had left home and were residing in student accommodation at the time of the interviews. 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. While they were fairly evenly represented by age (12 females and 8 males) and year of study (11 first years, 9 second years and 11 third years) this cohort were predominantly White (18), British (17) and under 21 years of age (16).

Interestingly, thirteen of these participants had elected to remain in their home region of the South East – only five students came from locations outside of this region, while the remaining two were international students – emphasising the somewhat limited geographical mobility of UK HE students mentioned in other studies (Duke-Williams, 2009; Holdsworth, 2009b).

This paper draws on the characteristics of Twigger-Ross and Uzzell's (1996) principles of 'place-identification' as an analytical tool to unpack how the participants expressed their attachment to their term-time location. Utilising this framework enables a two-fold approach. First, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how undergraduate students living in student accommodation establish a 'sense of place' during their transitions through university, and second, the empirical evidence advances notions of place identification and attachment by identifying the place-making habits of a transitional group. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell themselves have adapted this framework from Breakwell's (1986) model of 'identity process theory' to include examinations between place and identity. They note four key principles which are fundamental in establishing place identification: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Taken together, these principles provide a sound geographical understanding of people's relationships and identities with place. Hence,

employing elements of this framework during the analysis will assist in revealing how the transition through university takes effect on the students' attachment to place and how these attachments are spatially and temporally organised within the participants' term-time location.

4- Ideological first year spaces

A recurring theme which ran through the majority of the interviews was how University constituted a period of experimentation away from their parents and their home environment. This was reflected in the types of locations the students chose to visit as part of their interviews:

“I enjoy being here [Southsea Common] in the open space, being by the sea. The sea air's nice. Open fields have always appealed to me, [...] being in a seaside area is quite different to [home town]. In [home town] you've got areas where younger people tend to hang out as opposed to more families and older people” (David).

“When I first came to Portsmouth my thinking was that I was leaving my great big city to come to Portsmouth and I thought it would be fun but I thought that this place was a bit too quiet for me. And everything down here in Commercial Road closed at four on a Sunday which was even worse” (Carrie).

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) suggest that the role of past actions and experiences can be influential in the creation and maintenance of place identification within a new environment. This may be essential for those who have made a conscious decision to make a fresh start somewhere new, particularly through life-changing events in which a move can be constitutive of a new phase in a person's identity. Hence, while there may be a great deal of

self-imposed pressure here for the students to have a completely new set of experiences in their University location which differ to those experienced in the home environment, the participants' comments suggest that their 'home' experiences are still highly influential in developing place attachment within Portsmouth. As David's comment indicates, he appears to be constructing his sense of place in his term-time location as a reaction to his home environment, whereas Carrie articulates that her initial fears of the city being too quiet for her acted as a catalyst for actively exploring the wider networks of her University location.

Moreover, many of the participants' transitions from home to University were non-linear and often resulted in seemingly fractured living experiences during term-time. As Chow and Healey (2008) suggest, first year undergraduates retain continuity with their home-based networks in order to minimise their experiences of homesickness when moving from home to University accommodation. In the context of this study, these uneven transitions led to potentially disjointed relationships with place. While a strong connection with the familial home was apparent with the study, the empirical evidence extends Chow and Healey's claims by highlighting how the distinction between 'old' [home] and 'new' [student] identities may weaken attachments to home while strengthening them with their term-time associations:

"I think the student identity does change things. I find with some friends that I'm drifting away a bit more because I don't see them as often, but still, when we're back we go out together and hang out and stuff. But it's not the same kind of unity as we used to have [...] I feel like I've got two lives now" (Ben).

"We met once but it didn't really work out so I didn't see the point, to be fair. [...] Plus my friends from Uni [sic] have replaced my friends at home" (Dan).

Ben's and Dan's comments were fairly typical among the interview participants, indicating that their identities were affected by both spatial *and* temporal influences. This extends

Gustafsen's (2001) claims that place acts as a stabiliser for mobile individuals, these responses indicate how attachment to place can become disrupted for those in transition, particularly if their attachment to their new, temporary location outweighs that of their home environment. The burgeoning sense of place they are establishing in their term-time location may begin to erode their attachments to their non-student spaces at home. Taking Ben as an example, his student identity may be deemed appropriate among his fellow student friends and in the context of the student-centric spaces in which he socialises. However, this may not translate particularly well when he is living back among his pre-existing 'home-based' peer group if his new student identity is deemed incongruent to the norms and behaviours of his non-student friends (Gabriel, 2006).

One of the tactics employed by the participants in order to overcome homesickness and quickly establish connections with their term-time location was to replicate some of the 'pre-student' behaviours associated with home. This was pertinent as many of the students stressed that they had based their decision to attend the University of Portsmouth upon the learning and social experiences they assumed the University can offer them:

“That was one of the reasons why I joined Portsmouth because they had a music society” (Paul).

“It's why I came here, for the football really” (Dan).

Clayton et al. (2009) suggest that such locational strategies are performed in order to minimise any potential risks associated with moving away from the security of home. In extending this notion, some students chose locations to visit in which they performed familiar activities with home. Talking in these spaces which shared similarities with home highlighted the importance of retaining feelings of continuity within an unfamiliar environment:

“[Southsea Common] reminds me of home, I come here because back at home I live by the sea, I go longboarding on the seafront, I do everything on the seafront. I come here and just stroll, they’ve got like the war memorial and we’ve got that in [home city] and it reminds me of home” (Adele).

“I’m quite a solitary figure. I come from [South West county] and I’m not far from the coast where I live and I’ve always loved the sea. I suspect that that’s another reason why I did come to Portsmouth. It’s sort of fresh air, it sort of reminds me of home a bit. I love coming down here [the sea front] for a run as well.” (Paul).

What this hints at is that some of the students may be drawing upon their previous experiences as non-students (or pre-students) in order to frame their current student experiences. These discussions of replicating some of their home-based leisure activities within the city, suggests how the similarities between these environments were vital in cementing their ‘sense of place’ within the city. This notion of imitating behaviours and practices learned prior to commencing University extends Kenyon’s (1999) suggestion that continuity and memory are vitally important in the transitional phase for undergraduates. Whilst Kenyon’s study was concerned with how students use their belongings to inject a ‘vener’ of homeliness into their term time accommodation, the above remarks develop this by suggesting that this desire for familiarity extends from the home, into how wider community networks, external to the University, are interpreted and experienced and how this begins to shape experiences. This is particularly so as the way in which Adele and Paul have gone about their ‘sensing of place’ may also be viewed in contrast to many of the other students in the study who used their period at University as a way of ‘reinventing’ themselves away from their original, non-student peer group.

5- Limited geographical knowledge

Common among many of the narrated walks with first and second years was that their repeated use of the student-centric first year spaces around their halls of residences often impeded their knowledge of the wider networks of the city. The majority of these students were uncertain and tentative when walking between locations, often asking for reassurance as to where we were going even though they were in control of the route itself. This indicates that, for many of these students, their propinquity to first year spaces left them with a limited geography of Portsmouth:

“In halls it was very well serviced, the shops were right close to you and all the nightclubs and student areas. [...] Because my halls were over there [points to a hall on Guildhall Walk] I was practically on top of it so if we were pre-drinking in halls then we’d come down here to V-bar or Yates or something”
(Emma).

As Emma’s comment suggests, this confined layout may, of course, be useful for first year students as it provides little hindrance to their everyday routines. Christie et al. (2002) and Hubbard (2009) suggest that these intense spaces can be conducive for young students to experience opportunistic and diverse social interactions. However, while this provided a safe environment in year one, many of the second and third year interviewees who had previously lived in halls reflected that they had felt encapsulated in a ‘student bubble’ which limited their exposure to much of the rest of the city:

“I was in a year one bubble, if you could call it that, when you go from your halls to your Uni [sic] and back to your halls, to the pub and then back to your halls again” (Tim).

“I think it’s easy to be in a student bubble. It definitely was last year, only talking to students, only doing student things and it’s quite nice to know the city beyond that, a typical student life is actually quite limited with the things you do” (Kay).

Nevertheless, while Kay’s and Tim’s comments were expressed through the benefit of hindsight, the predominant theme which ran through the first year responses was that being close to campus was the most appropriate setting for fully immersing within the ‘student community’. This was expressed through the experiences of those first years living in rented accommodation who experienced greater difficulties in being able to traverse the city as they often lived some distance from the University campus. Unlike the participants in halls who, by virtue of their propinquity to other students, were likely to have a more intense student experience, those first year students in rented housing were residing and socialising in spaces which may not necessarily fit their more typical fresher identities (Christie et al., 2002). Incorporating alternative living arrangements may therefore extend this by suggesting that the geographical location of a student’s term-time accommodation may influence how they equate their experience of ‘being a student’, particularly as many of the incentives of going out are aimed primarily at those in halls:

“I know full well that my friends that were stuck in houses in their first year felt very left out socially, by the Uni [sic] especially because we would have reps and stuff coming to our doors, encouraging us to go out and letting us in on the student nights and they just had none of that” (Emma).

“I definitely felt like I missed out on the whole halls experience, meeting new people, having loads of people on your floor. There was just the five of us and that was kind of it at the start so I definitely feel I missed out there” (Claire).

What these comments indicate is that those first years living in rented houses in Southsea felt somewhat disadvantaged by their living arrangements, particularly as they were unlikely to be included in much of the more spontaneous night-time socialising associated with halls living. This social restriction adds to the spatial limitations of living outside of the margins of this 'student bubble' and may ultimately impact upon their opportunity to manage their environment successfully as the participants responses indicate that their attachment to their term-time location developed at a much slower rate than that of their contemporaries in halls.

In contrast, Adele suggests that, while living away from the 'hub' of student activity might not have lived up to her ideological expectations of 'being' a student, her experiences living in a rented house provided her with a richer, more detailed attachment to her term-time location as it gave her the opportunity to develop connections with places well before her peers in halls:

"I've been all over Portsmouth, to the top, the bottom, pretty much all over. But with my friends in halls I'd say to them "you been to that?" and they'll say "nah". A lot of them really are clueless, I took myself around, it took me a while but I just wanted to experience places whereas some of them, they haven't even been to the common. It's a completely different experience to what I've had, I mean it's an advantage in that aspect" (Adele).

As Adele's comment suggests, this head start over her first year friends who had lived in halls was discussed in terms of her perceptions of how residing in a student house may be indicative of a more 'mature' outlook on her term-time location (others spoke of increased independence, such as having direct contact with landlords, dealing with non-student neighbours or having to make responsible decisions like budgeting for bills or arranging refuse collections). In contrast to Emma's and Claire's earlier negative accounts, Adele's

comments outline the opportunities living in a rented house may have presented to her. Her increased and diverse knowledge of the city provided her with a substantial amount of social and cultural capital meaning her understanding of how to 'get along' at University was extremely acute, allowing her to establish a more varied friendship group. Adele's confidence with traversing the city was also reflected in her interview, with her inclination to take short-cuts and side-streets instead of following the more conventional routes which her counterparts in halls took. This suggests that this cohort of students may be capable of mobilising specific, yet tailored coping strategies in order to minimise risk and maximise their potential to gain leverage among their peers.

6- Adaptive place attachment?

The more superficial associations with place during first year appeared to strengthen significantly as they moved from halls into rented accommodation, signifying a more nuanced form of place identification had begun to form for the participants. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) suggest that those who express an attachment to their settlement may be more capable of making distinctions within these spaces which emphasise the differences between the people within them. This was clearly evident within the study, with fewer comparisons being made between home and term-time locations in favour of comparing different locations within Portsmouth as their knowledge and confidence of being in the city grew:

“I never had any concept of Fratton or Southsea before I was in the house. [...]

Portsmouth always seemed very nice from halls and Fratton showed me the less brilliant areas, in a way” (Emma).

“The people who live here [Southsea] are some of the nicest people and they don't judge students, you know there is this assumption that students who live

in Guildhall are the noisiest and loudest students but the more you move down here it's much more relaxed" (Farah).

These comments extend Twigger-Ross and Uzzell's (1996) notion of place identity through distinctiveness by suggesting the existence of what may be termed *experiential* distinction which distinguishes how the students identified with different sites of social activities. In line with Hollands (1995) and Chatterton (1999), the majority of the students within the study expressed a propensity to change or modify their social activities year on year, swapping the bars and clubs associated with being freshers for the less student-centric pubs and live music venues adjacent to their rented accommodation. Whilst this signifies an *unlearning* of the rules of the student game (Chatterton, 1999), this also constitutes what could be termed a 're-sensing' of place for second and third year students. During the walking interviews it became apparent that these multiple senses of place were messily layered, with some parts of the city, particularly the nightclubs in Gunwharf Quays, being used in different ways from year to year:

"Liam spoke confidently about how his social life had adapted over the course of his degree, particularly how he categorised many of the clubs as first, second and third year spaces, even though they're all being used by the same students. Being in a walking interview situation allowed us to visit each location and develop an image of what these spaces meant to him. Liam actually began to analyse his own experiences, picking up on things he thought he'd contradicted himself on earlier" (Research Diary).

This highlights how the students may ascribe, seemingly unconscious, value judgements to such locations, overlapping their individualised senses of place over time and providing them with flexible relationships with place.

This notion of experiential distinction takes on elements of Twigger-Ross and Uzzell's (1996) *local identification* category – the significance of recognising people and also being recognised by other people in the local environment. While none of these non-local interview participants expressed having an attachment to Portsmouth prior to University there is a suggestion that the intensity of being involved in such a seemingly exclusive group (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003) allowed these students to gain an attachment to their University location so quickly:

“It hit me that I know quite a few people compared to my first year. We were out with the first years on a society night and there were a couple of freshers and I was bumping into people all the time and they didn't really know who to talk to and I thought ‘I was like that two years ago’ and then in two years time ‘whoa, I know all these people’, amazing” (Liam).

Liam's comment adds to Pretty et al's. (2003) proposition that age is an important factor in forming a 'sense of place', suggesting that rather than developing a deep connection with place, a hierarchical attachment may in fact exist for the young interviewees which positions their place attachment in relation to the younger year groups. In Liam's case, he prioritises his attachment to (and knowledge of) particular social spaces as a third year student over his younger counterparts as a way of staking his claim, or validating his sense of being a student in these environments.

For many of the participants, as they progressed into subsequent years, the move from halls into rented accommodation served to expand their sense of positivity towards their term-time environment, particularly as this appeared to coincide with relocating into a new residential environment, some way from the more typical freshers' spaces:

“I’d never really been to Southsea before and moving into [road] now I can walk around Southsea quite confidently and know where I’m going and that’s only after four or five months. It’s definitely given me new ways of meeting people, knowing new places. We have some good nights out in Southsea now” (Tim).

Tim’s comment suggests that his move from halls into a rented house has been a positive step in expanding his knowledge of the city by enhancing his self-confidence. As Manzo (2005) suggests, these adaptive relationships to place can be representative of an ever-evolving self-awareness. This was replicated across much of this cohort, with the majority of interviewees suggesting that leaving the halls environment constituted a pivotal moment in the development of their student identities, giving them an increased level of autonomy not previously available in halls.

In contrast to these accounts of successful transitions, some of the respondents spoke of how this move dented their self-confidence, particularly if the move was deemed problematic:

“I’d got used to everyone in halls and it was that everything was so far away, you’d have to walk ten to fifteen minutes to get anywhere. It was the whole change of it all really, because the University hall is brilliant, everything is catered for. But then you move into the real world of student housing and you have to work out bills and not leaving lights on and cleaning and it’s just the environment changes completely and you’re not ready for it. If I could stay in halls all the time then I would” (Ruth).

“In my flat there was only two other boys and they’d already made arrangements and I hadn’t made good friends with anybody on my course yet. Because you have to decide quite early on where you’re going to live, so we

[two other girls] just decided to stick together. [...] It's a bit different when you're in a house. You're around each other a lot more often, obviously sharing a bathroom, and you start to notice things which annoy you a bit more than when you're in halls" (Jenny).

Ruth's and Jenny's accounts contrast with Tim's positive outlook by suggesting that their periods of living in rented accommodation differed to their initial expectations (this was exacerbated by both of these participants having bad experiences living with new housemates in year two). While Jenny overcame this by making alternative living arrangements for the following year, Ruth's experience was so traumatic that it resulted in her moving back with her parents for her final year. For Ruth it would appear that this experience was enough to destabilise her perceptions of accommodation, the University and the city itself, particularly as she severed most of her University connections in favour of her home-based friends:

"I'm only in contact with two people now from University [...] I definitely spend more time with my friends back home [...] it is one thing that I've noticed that everything changes all the time, University people are just coming and going, people are changing courses and changing living arrangements and you have to say to yourself, how much do you want this person in your life?" (Ruth).

Manzo (2003) suggests that, in relation to positive laden discourses, these negative experiences of place are rarely discussed in relation to place attachment, stressing that all places are capable of holding emotive values, positive or otherwise. Ruth's experiences provide an example of this by highlighting the fragility of self-esteem among this young transient cohort. While there may be a sense that the progression through University increases emotional associations with place, negative incidents within micro-environments, such as

student accommodation, can begin to seep into how these students evaluate their wider social networks and their interpretation of the city, resulting in a weakening of their overall place-attachment.

For many of the participants, while the move from halls into rented housing expanded their knowledge of the wider networks of the city, this relocation also gave them the confidence to experiment with different, often non-student, social environments within Portsmouth. This was evident during the walking interviews with many of the participants pointing out locations which corresponded with different activities they were involved in at certain stages of their time in Portsmouth:

“Last year we did fitness training and we would come down by the monument over there [indicates the war memorial] and everyone was like ‘go to Southsea Common’ and I was like ‘I don’t know where that is?’ I had to look it up on a map and carry a map with me to find it. That’s how I first found out about it, and even now I’m finding out about different parts of the beach that I didn’t know about before, it’s much bigger than I thought it was” (Jenny).

“[...] because I come sailing down here I’ve built an attachment to this place, I didn’t have it in first or second year, but because of the society, I connect. In first year it was just a bit of water but now I’ve got a bit of an attachment to it” (Liam).

“I just like going for walks. I found this place, I didn’t even know it was called [Southsea] common. I didn’t know it first year, but in second year, one day I came out somewhere and took a wrong turning and came out by the top there [indicates towards the Queens Hotel]. I thought it looked like quite a nice space and I thought I’d cut across and go to the beach while I was here. [...] I thought

that that would be quite nice in the summer. Then I found the short cut near my house and I thought ‘how good is this’? It only takes twenty minutes to get to the beach if I want to” (Carrie).

As these comments suggest, the immersive *freshers*’ experience, desired so badly by many of the first year respondents may be rejected once the environment in which it is contained was left. This extends Chatterton’s (1999) notion of the process of ‘un-learning’ behaviours in subsequent years by focusing on the role of residential location in influencing these behavioural changes. As well as ‘un-learning’ of student behaviours which were reflective of their growing sense of independence, these students were also exhibiting signs of learning ‘new’ behaviours in which the social identities created in first year went on to inform new social practices in subsequent years. Where the participants spoke of year one providing a platform for them to learn to *become* students, subsequent years allowed them to relax into *being* students. Thus the haphazard attempts these students made at making connections with their term-time location in first year gave way to more strategic endeavours which were expressed through more varied social activities and a shift in how these second and third year students interpreted their term-time environment. New processes, such as more interdependent living arrangements, greater workloads and a change of social activities away from the more mainstream freshers’ night-spots appear fundamental in ‘re-positioning’ how these students might ‘sense’ place, subsequently creating identities which can often be contrary to their former selves. From this it may be assumed that these students are using this transition between year groups as a way of legitimising the honing and restructuring of their identities, suggesting that the change in spatial contexts, from halls into rented accommodation, is a key driver in nurturing a student identity which is separate to the ones they formed in their first year. Moreover, these new spaces are also indicative of a strengthening of a sense of place for this group of young adults. This was particularly evident

during the walking interviews whereby many of the participants spoke of how their attachment to certain places had developed or altered over time. As Easthope (2004) points out, we often feel most at home in the places in which our identities have developed, suggesting that, among the study cohort who had moved into rented housing, the transformations their identities were undergoing year on year may be indicative of a strengthening of place attachment and a certain increase in confidence and safety.

7- Conclusion

In conclusion this paper has sought to unpack the experiences of a set of undergraduate students who have moved away from the family home in order to better understand the ways in which students might go about establishing a sense of place within their term-time location. While the participants within this study may not necessarily have fully grasped the influence their transition through University had upon their own evolving place attachment, they appeared to understand the necessity of moving forwards and utilising the spaces most appropriate for their stage of development (freshers' bars for first years etc.). For many of the participants, the move from halls into rented accommodation prompted a geographical, as well as social, change as the participants spoke of their broadened understanding of the city coinciding with the move into a shared rented property. Hence, the routinised behaviours they were carrying out in the vicinity of their accommodation (shopping, socialising etc.) allowed them to quickly establish weak connections with these places creating a *partial* or *personal* 'sense of place' (Hay, 1998) which legitimised their experiences of 'being' University students in Portsmouth. Importantly, this fluidity of 'sensing place' in different parts of the city contributes to discussions of student mobility by highlighting the complex ways in which students may go about interpreting and *re*-interpreting different parts of their term-time

location, opening up (and more precisely) closing off locations that fit with their particular stage of 'being' students.

Alongside this, the evidence suggests that students, like other mobile groups (e.g. diasporic or expatriate communities), are likely to import significant amounts of their former selves into their University lives and, as the interview responses reveal, this impacts greatly upon how they initially interpret their University location and how this develops over the course of their degrees. However, unique to students is that their 'student' identities and attachments to their term-time location are usually time-bound and are likely to adapt (and conclude) as they progress through their degree pathway. As Anderson (2010) suggests, young people can be characterised as 'in-between', in that they exist on the margin of youth and adulthood. Their position between these conventional categories marks them out as "liminal beings" (p.133) in that their past is essentially suspended whilst their future adult potential is yet to be realised. Hence, going to University may constitute an ideal opportunity to break from this marginal state, particularly as prior to this most young people are socially and spatially separated from the trappings of adulthood. This may be pertinent as this point of entry into University, these students are being introduced to typically 'adult' behaviours, such as unsupervised night-time socialising, in which they are learning to control how they wish to experience these behaviours.

Importantly this research highlights the capability for sense of place and place attachment to be highly malleable, allowing those in transition the opportunity to adapt their relationship with their term-time location to suit their evolving social tastes and maturity and expanding geographical knowledge of the city. Hence, rather than being simply a stage in the life-course, a period living and studying away from home may consist of a series of micro-encounters with different locations, and at different times, all of which requiring different

levels of place attachment which may compliment or contrast with one another. As the evidence here demonstrates, when combined, the messiness of these micro-encounters may expand upon the highly individualised sense of place alluded to by Hay (1998) and Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996), whereby a number of weak ties become grouped together (accommodation, University buildings, sports societies, night-time venues, open spaces etc.) to create an over-arching, flexible and, at least for the duration of the degree, robust sense of place within their term-time location.

Broadly speaking, this research adds a spatial element to discussions of undergraduate transitions by questioning the influence place attachment may have upon the formation of undergraduates' identities and their experiences of 'being', or 'becoming' students. Focusing upon the micro-geographies of this cohort emphasises how the period of being a student differs both across the cohort and throughout the degree pathway and can trigger a myriad of emotional responses which contribute to [un]successful transitions through the rest of the degree pathway. Recognising this heterogeneity may provide crucial knowledge and be useful in alleviating pressures, such as insecurities regarding fitting in amongst unfamiliar peer groups or a lack of confidence concerning engagement with academic and non-academic practices, by drawing attention to the non-linearity of students' associations with their term-time location. Hence the largely positive experiences of the participants here add to these literatures (e.g. Scopelitti and Tiberio, 2010) by highlighting how an evolving relationship with place may encourage an intense involvement with student-centric activities while or serve to create barriers, both socially and spatially from more typical student behaviours.

Finally, what this paper has been conscious to achieve is a deeper understanding of the motivations of a more typical cohort of students, the experiences of students who have left home to go to University, rather than fetishizing the margins. That said, further research in

this vein may be useful in examining the place attachment of 'home-based' students who have elected to attend a local institution and whether their student and non-student identities may influence or disrupt their overall sense of place within their home/University location. Equally, applying these notions of place attachment to young *non*-students living in a University town or city may provide an interesting counterpoint to these participant's experiences, particularly when considering the potential social and geographical changes, barriers and opportunities which are often experienced in University locations due to the seasonality of student populations.

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