

“Of Elephants, Opinions, and Partial Truths: Communities in Motion”

David Osborne

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Abstract

Concepts of place and community are central to the ways in which people relate to and interact with each other and to the environments in which they function. This paper discusses the role of personal and social meaning in the development of these concepts and, in particular, discusses the relevance of Massey’s (1995) concept of social networks as the framework within which the creation and exchange of meaning can occur. The paper emphasizes that, in the investigations into behaviour within communities and place, there is a need to retain an holistic approach to the study of the phenomena that includes not only the phenomena but the context within which that phenomena occurs.

Full text

Introduction

I am very privileged to be here as a keynote speaker, and I would like to express my thanks to Professor Yusoff for his generous invitation; equally – or perhaps more importantly – I would like to thank him and the organizing committee for putting together this conference, and providing us all with the opportunity to express our opinions, share our work, and exchange ideas in such a magnificently tranquil environment. So in between sipping chilled coconut milk and vegetating by the pool let us ensure we reserve a moment or two to discuss the conference topics with each other, and provide the much-valued critical commentary on each others work.

The theme of our conference revolves around communities and human behaviour, and I would like to utilize this introductory talk to reflect on the social networks that influence both communities and places. In addition I wish to discuss two aspects of our research in these areas that I feel are often neglected, namely the prioritizing of explanatory meaning over description of attributes, and the importance of an holistic study of the phenomena within the context of its relationship with the world outside of itself.

This is not necessarily a great revelation to many of you as these are not new ideas, yet even a casual scan of recent journals will show an unnerving number of articles describing reductionist studies that examine phenomena as if they were encased in glass jars, quite isolated from the world around them or, equally unnerving, studies that satisfy themselves by producing a description of selected attributes from the phenomenon under study. This paper holds that communities and places are shaped by the behaviour of people; the significant factor, therefore, is more to do with understanding a person's response to (or interaction with) that attribute and less to do with a description of the attribute.

My own field of research – and an interest that borders on a passion - is exploring the ways that people make places, thus it should be no surprise when I draw on place studies for much of this presentation. My particular focus is on the social interactions that generate meaning for people that, ultimately, go towards developing the various identities of place. This process creates personal places and social places, and both are intimately engaged with the notion of communities.

One of the most engaging theories of place creation (for me) relates to the connectivity of social groups – social networks – for the formation of place which can equally be seen as the connectivity of individuals into networks of communities. I want to briefly explore this connectivity with reference to meaning-creation between social groups, and the significance of context to this process, particularly the context that extends beyond the place or the community under study. And propose that, in order to satisfactorily explore such contexts, we need to adopt research approaches that allow for a holistic and contextual investigation of the phenomena under study.

Recognising connectivity allows us insight into how places and communities work; however, it is only when we begin to access the meaning that this connectivity generates that we begin to explain why they work and we begin to gain insight into the behaviour of people within these places and communities.

I will draw on the work of Doreen Massey (1991, 1992, 1995) in particular to illustrate these points; Massey proposed the idea of place as being a node on a network of social interactions (Easthope 2004), and it is sometimes hard to distinguish between 'place' and 'community' when discussing her theories.

So, to summarise the content of my presentation today, I intend to:

- discuss place and community through the significance of meanings rather than attributes
- stress the essential functions of social connectivity for place and community
- highlight the significance of holistic and contextual research in order to understand and explain that connectivity
- discuss Massey's concept of social networks as they influence and apply to places and communities

I will conclude with Massey's own analysis of Kilburn high street in London by way of illustration of these points.

Of elephants, opinions, and partial truths

I see my role as keynote speaker as one that attempts to energise, inspire, and unite the room.....a challenging task indeed, and one that calls for something BIG to start my address.

Elephants...

There is an old folk tale, possibly of Chinese origin, probably Indian, that tells of three blind men encountering an elephant for the first time. The first blind man held the elephant by the trunk.

"Ah," he said, "the elephant is so like a water hose."

The second blind man had grabbed the elephant by the leg.

"Oh no, " he argued, " the elephant is very much like a tree."

The third blind man had grasped the elephant by the tail.

"I'm sorry, you are both wrong, " he said, "the elephant is very much like a rope."

The story illustrates how wrong you can be when you appear to be so obviously right. The three blind men engaged with individual physical attributes of the elephant (the trunk, the leg, and the tail) and attempted to describe those attributes. They then went further, in that they assumed those descriptions could be transferred directly to the elephant. If the three blind men went on to publish their findings in academic journals I'm sure they

each could make a case for their individual arguments by qualifying and limiting their respective empirical 'studies'. And then they'd all be in disagreement and the door would be opened for further studies. I don't want to dwell on the disagreements, but I would like to use this tale to make three observations and consider them in relation to the challenges that face research into people's behaviour within places and within communities.

The first observation relates to the study of attributes in general. The three blind men took single attributes and provided a description of these attributes. But attributes in themselves provide limited information about the phenomenon and less information about the behaviour of or about the phenomenon. Behaviour, in particular, is not about the attribute but about response to and interpretation of the attribute by people. In the context of place, Lichrou et al (2008) contest the treatment of place as a set of attributes and argue for a broader conceptualization in terms of the meaning each place holds for each person. Given the complexity of place – and communities – through the intertwining of historic, cultural, political and social influences (Easthope 2004), Lichrou et al (2008) argue against *presenting* places as a set of attributes, in favour of *understanding* places as sites of meaning.

Lichrou et al (2008) propose a more flexible conceptualization of place; they argue that places should be branded based on the meanings they hold, or can provide, to interested stakeholders. They emphasise the dynamic and fluid nature of place (consistent with the arguments of, say, Massey (1995) or Easthope (2004)) and question how identities created from a list of attributes can respond to such shifts. By comparison, a narrative approach - which is a fundamental method by which we create meaning for ourselves in society (Bruner 1986, 1990; Escalas 2004) - is both more natural and more flexible. Further, it better accommodates for the contestations of place, providing a framework that can accommodate a variety of narratives without the exclusion of others. This argument can be applied equally to communities as it can to place in terms of their common reliance on meaning as a foundation.

Secondly, there is the issue of connectivity. Our blind men are at odds about their findings yet, as we all are aware, if they were to connect their findings then a larger picture would begin to emerge - not only a larger descriptive picture but perhaps a picture that begins to suggest how this phenomenon might function (legs to support, trunk to feed etc). When we extend that connectivity beyond the phenomenon, beyond our elephant, to the grasslands they inhabit or to the structured social world of an elephant herd, we begin to better understand and explain their behaviour.

Which leads to my third observation which relates to the need for holistic study. It is clear there is much more to be learned about our elephant than is revealed by the blind men. It seems equally clear that there are a complex set of circumstances within which our elephant operates and which subsequently will influence his behaviour. The context, or setting of our elephant, includes amongst other things his physiology, his physical world (the savannah), and his social world (the herd), each of which exercises a varying amount of influence at different times and under different conditions. It is possible, obviously, to draw lines and segment this context, but that risks obscuring the collective effects of the different conditions. Thus Lichrou et al (2008), for example, promote support for research that responds to the phenomenon holistically, rather than breaking it down into component parts, in order for us to make sense of it.

There are, I am sure, other lessons to be drawn from our elephant and his treatment at the hands of the blind men. But, in relation to our studies of the behaviour of people in their environments – be that place or community - it is these three observations that I wish to emphasise today; the significance of meaning, the importance of connectivity, and the necessity of holistic study.

And to do this I would like to again draw examples from place studies – in particular the work of Doreen Massey – to show how meaning is created, exchanged, and contested through networks of social communities that extend beyond the phenomenon under study.

Of people in places, people in communities

People create meaning which creates place

Within my presentation today I am crossing over between ‘places’ and ‘communities’, as you have probably noticed. My area of research interest is related to concepts of ‘place’ and, particularly, the way in which people use meaning – both personal and social – in order to create places. People create meaning in relation to place through the activities in which they engage (Agnew 1987; Canter 1977; Massey 1995; Relph 1976); these activities occur within a social, physical, cultural, and political context. From this meaning people create the elements that constitute ‘sense of place’, namely place dependency, place attachment, and place identity (Jurgensen and Steadman 2001). I should further qualify that I use the terms ‘place’ and ‘sense of place’ as interchangeable; ‘place’ is very much a social construct and therefore varies between individuals. There is no absolute

condition of 'place' only a series of 'sense of place'. 'Place' and 'sense of place' describe the same condition; they are one condition, not two.

Communities exist within and beyond places

There is often an assumed association between 'place' and 'community', as places can be seen as the sites that accommodate communities. Yet whilst it can be shown that there are frequently relationships between communities and places, these relationships are far from simple and cannot be written off as simply one condition accommodating the other. Whilst there may exist a somewhat romanticised notion of "an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities" (Massey 1991, p.1), the reality is that 'place' and 'community' have "only rarely been coterminous" (Massey 1991, p.1). Massey argues that communities are capable of existing without them being in the same place – she cites networks of friends with common interests, for example, or religious orders – and, equally, she believes the instances of places housing single and complete communities are quite rare (Massey 1994). Nevertheless, 'place' and 'community' are inextricably linked and, more importantly in relation to this paper, there are commonalities in the way they operate. Perhaps the most significant link is their reliance on meaning; places are created through meaning, whilst communities are formed more specifically through shared meaning, generally in the form of common values and beliefs. In both cases much of this meaning is generated through networks of social interactions, which a closer look at Massey's notion of 'place' will illustrate.

Place as a node on a social network

Doreen Massey's (1991, 1992, 1995) view of place offers a rich and complex definition of place based on its significance as a "site of negotiated meaning within networks of social relationships, rather than simply in terms of qualities that exist within a physical locality" (Easthope, 2004). She views places as processes not entities; place - in addition to (often) being a geographically-defined location - can be defined as a node on a network of social interactions (Massey, 1995; Massey and Jess, 1995) and as such provides a far more flexible and accommodating description of place than, for example, the models of Relph (1976), Canter (1977), and Agnew (1987). Within Massey's definition of place social exchanges play a critical role for imbuing place with meaning.

To explain her concept of place as a node on a network of social interactions, Massey (1994) asks us to imagine looking down on earth from a satellite, and to imagine we can see the communications taking place around the globe. We would be able to see the

physical movement of peoples - business travelers, holiday-makers, migrants – we would see phone calls, faxes and emails; we would see cultural icons being transferred from one place to another. Ultimately we would recognize that the geographical approximations called ‘places’ were in fact intersections of a host of communications. We would come to recognize that places and their associated identities would be difficult to describe – if not impossible – without reference to these external links and, further, that it was to a great extent these external links that defined these ‘places’. And this seething mass of activity creates an identity that is constantly in flux; never static, never fixed, but always moving. Viewing place as a ‘node’ within a social network emphasises the dynamic nature of place; social networks extend beyond the local and thus the influencers of place extend beyond the physical boundaries of place. Thus not only are places unbounded but they are also unsettled; they are fluid, dynamic centres where meanings and beliefs are exchanged through social interaction. This is what Massey describes as the geography of social relations; places are very much comprised of a wide variety of cultural – and associated physical – geographies (Massey 1994).

These networks can be, or can support, communities as well as providing the foundation for concepts of place which once again emphasizes the interlinking – if not interdependence – of ‘place’ and ‘community’. A simple example would be San Francisco’s Chinatown; that it has strong links outside of itself is clear yet it is at once a ‘place’ and a ‘community’, both developed to a large degree from similar sets of values and beliefs.

The example of Kilburn

By way of a concrete illustration of these concepts I would draw on Massey’s own example from her neighborhood, Kilburn, in London, England. It engages all the issues this paper has proposed and sheds light on the formation and maintenance of both ‘place’ and ‘community’.

First, imagine a London suburb in your mind. London, England. What images come to mind? What do the streets look like, who is walking those streets, what is happening on those streets? London, England.

Now let me read you – and illustrate for you – a brief description provided by Doreen Massey from her neighborhood of London, Kilburn:

“Take, for instance, a walk down Kilburn High Road, my local shopping centre. It is a pretty ordinary place, north-west of the centre of London. Under the railway

bridge the newspaper stand sells papers from every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come from there, still often call the Irish Free State. The postboxes down the High Road, and many an empty space on a wall, are adorned with the letters IRA. Other available spaces are plastered this week with posters for a special meeting in remembrance: Ten Years after the Hunger Strike. At the local theatre Eamon Morrissey has a one-man show; the National Club has the Wolfe Tones on, and at the Black Lion there's Finnegans Wake. In two shops I notice this week's lottery ticket winners: in one the name is Teresa Gleeson, in the other, Chouman Hassan.

Thread your way through the often almost stationary traffic diagonally across the road from the newsstand and there's a shop which as long as I can remember has displayed saris in the window. Four life-sized models of Indian women, and reams of cloth. On the door a notice announces a forthcoming concert at Wembley Arena: Anand Miland presents Rekha, live, with Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Jai Chawla and Raveena Tandon. On another ad, for the end of the month, is written, 'All Hindus are cordially invited'. In another newsagent's I chat with the man who keeps it, a Muslim unutterably depressed by events in the Gulf, silently chafing at having to sell the *Sun*. Overhead there is always at least one aeroplane - we seem to have on a flight-path to Heathrow and by the time they're over Kilburn you can see them clearly enough to tell the airline and wonder as you struggle with your shopping where they're coming from. Below, the reason the traffic is snarled up (another odd effect of time-space compression!) is in part because this is one of the main entrances to and escape routes from London, the road to Staples Corner and the beginning of the M1 to 'the North'."

I would guess that the image you conjured in your mind before I read this passage was quite different from this description by Massey. My purpose here is firstly to illustrate the rich tapestry that makes up the visual identity of Kilburn high street and secondly to then illustrate the connectivity with 'places', cultures, histories, and politics that are not native to Kilburn high street. And that, without those connections, that identity would not exist. So what is significant in this description?

Firstly, Kilburn can be seen to comprise of a series of communities quite different from each other, and thus it can be seen to have many different identities rather than one single all-encompassing identity. Whilst it certainly has its own character, it is not "a

seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares” (Massey 1991, p.6).

Secondly, and recognizing the interplay of communities, it is impossible to understand Kilburn without considering other places, cultures, and histories from around the world. As a place, as a ‘character’, or as a series of communities, it is dependent for its identities upon its place within that complex network, and to attempt to explain the behaviour of these communities without reference to these networks would, at best, appear a daunting task. It has no concrete boundaries, either as a place or as a community. To describe its geographic limits, its coordinates on the planet are somewhat arbitrary; they have a purpose in that such coordinates will get you close to the study area, but they will do little to illuminate the reasons that explain the actions of the community.

Thirdly, and not necessarily immediately apparent within the confines of this description, it should be emphasized that both places and communities are unsettled; they are fluid, dynamic centres where meanings and beliefs are exchanged through social interaction” (Massey 1994). They are processes rather than entities which reinforces the need to study meaning rather than attributes; attributes can remain unchanged for decades but the significance of those attributes to people, the way in which they are interpreted, can change within generations.

Massey points out that this kind of analysis can be made of any place in the world. The connections might not be so obvious or so striking as Kilburn, but most places and communities rely to a greater or lesser degree on connections to other places and communities outside of themselves. They cannot be isolated from the contexts that shape them and therefore, I propose, the research to understand them cannot be isolated from the context or the connectivity. They are complex phenomena formed around shared meanings and beliefs, often made more complicated when some beliefs are challenged within the group. Such beliefs can be – and often are – disputed, leading to disagreements within the community, contestations of purpose between protagonists each claiming the rights of membership to the community. So even within what might appear to be a stable community there is no guarantee of total agreement on beliefs and values. Perhaps another lesson from our elephant is how well the blind men represent the actions of community; their behaviour is based on interpretation, on the meaning that they gain from their exposure to the phenomenon; it is easy to imagine how, with a little more exploration, that meaning could change for them; and they each have equal rights of membership to their community of three and each have equal access to the context of

their community. Their actions are a result of interpretation and the development of personal meaning and yet in this case, principally for lack of an holistic research approach, contestation arises.

Conclusion

Massey's concept of place is rich and vibrant, and provides us with some clear conditions for the construction of place; firstly, place is based on meanings, [based on meanings not on attributes] both personal and community-based meanings. Whilst she doesn't deny the importance of attributes – for example, elements of the physical realm – she does argue that these are interpreted elements within the social framework. The significance for researchers is two-fold; firstly, that [provides a better understanding of the dynamic nature] place and community concepts can be seen as unstable. They are dynamic, fluid, and in a constant change of flux. Secondly, it helps to explain how contestations of place and community occur [explains contestations of place]. Given the social constructionist nature of place, people who have equal 'claim to place' can have quite different opinions as to how that place should be used, or how its future should be developed. The same can be said of communities, for whilst there are common bonds of meaning in the form of values and beliefs, variations occur with the group that will affect 'claims to membership'.

Our second take-away from Massey is connectivity; places and communities neither exist nor are created in a vacuum. They are influenced through events and activities external to themselves which are learned, negotiated, and exchanged through a network of social interactions.

Our third and final take-away from Massey – and going back to our dear old elephant - we need to consider the phenomenon in context. The physiology of our elephant has evolved partly in response to the environment in which it operates. And its behaviour is greatly influenced by the social factors inherent in the herd – and, indeed the inhospitable anti-social elements that might threaten that herd. Our places and communities are no different; we need to know the conditions under which they operate. We need to look beyond and outside of the immediate phenomenon at the extended context that influences it. We need an holistic view of the phenomenon in context.

And possibly, if we have a quiet word with the blind men and emphasise our three points, they can gain a better understanding of our elephant....

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