What Makes Somewhere the Best Place to Live?

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to analyze how the superiority of a living place is determined. The paper begins by building a conceptual framework of the sense of place. It positions place identity, place uniqueness and place dependency as concepts evolving through reciprocal interaction. The paper explores two empirical questions; first the meaning themes characterizing the best living place are analyzed. Second, the types of reasoning used to justify the superiority of the place are investigated. A dataset gathered in a competition is analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Social, functional and environmental meaning themes form the co-occurring categories of justification. Four types of reasoning is identified; belonging, convenience, distinction and convincing. These findings are discussed alongside those from earlier research.

INTRODUCTION
Social scientists have long been interested in the meanings that different places hold for people. For instance, in 1976, Relph identified three components of place: physical settings, activities and meanings, and argued that meanings are probably the most difficult to grasp. Since then, meanings given to places and the more general topic of people's relationships with places have attracted several researchers (e.g. Jaakson 1986; Sixsmith 1986; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996; Gustafson 2001; Manzo 2005).

Meanings related to home place or other important places can indeed be multifarious and dynamic. One of the challenges posed by place-based research in general is that places are not isolated and static, but are continually reproduced in interaction with their surroundings (Massey 1994; Smaldone, Harris, and Sanyal 2005). Therefore, places can mean different things to different people at different times.

Prior empirical research on places has focused on several different kinds of places ranging from nations to small living areas. Home-related meanings however, constitute an important area of research (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Sixsmith 1986; Moore 2000). The previous findings show that small places (e.g. residences and neighborhoods) are given self-related meanings more often than larger places (e.g. nations and continents) which are usually attributed with meanings related to others and to environment (see Gustafson 2001, p.12; Canter 1997). However, meaningful places can be both current residences and places outside of a person’s own residence (Manzo 2005, p.74).

The current work focuses on the positive side of places, but approaches the subject from a different point of view than has been adopted previously. This study is interested in finding out what becomes important to people when they are asked to spontaneously address the question of why some place is the best place to live. The focus is on the nature of the meanings people use in their reasoning, when they try to convince someone that a particular place really is the best; and on the underlying issues that make some place “special.”

This article aims to analyze how the superiority of the living place is determined. To accomplish this, our empirical analysis focuses on a local community, Sulva village, which is located in the Mustasaari municipality in Finland. Sulva was selected as the best place to live in 2006, in a competition organized by the “Good Living 2010” –development project. The current paper addresses the research question inductively so that empirical data is discussed alongside prior theoretical concepts. It begins by building a preliminary understanding of the useful theoretical concepts. After that, the paper explores two empirical questions; first analyzing what kinds of meaning themes characterize the best living place. By identifying the meaning themes, we are able to show the breadth and multiplicity of our empirical data. Second, the types of reasoning used to justify the superiority of the place are investigated. Based on the nature of our data, we are able to discover the underlying types of reasoning used to convince other people of the superiority of Sulva.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Much of the previous research on place has concentrated on understanding our relationships with places. People’s strong bonds to places have particularly fascinated researchers. This is because the feelings of belonging, protection and comfort have been found to describe people living and visiting different places (Manzo 2003; Moore 2000). Further, the concepts of place attachment, place identity, place dependence and sense of place provide a rich and diverse set of approaches to help understand a connection to a place. However, there is still some disagreement with the definitions of these concepts; the disparities resulting from the researchers’ different perspectives, ontological and epistemological backgrounds as well as the variety of study contexts (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon 2004; Lewicka 2008, p.211; Kyle and Chich 2007, p.210). Below we identify the meanings of these concepts, form an initial conceptual model of them, and explicate their use in the present study.

A person’s connection to a place is based on their creation of meaning for that place; it is an emotional bond between a person and a place that develops over time. The concept used to describe this bond, as well as its strength is referred to as place attachment (Low and Altman 1992; Smaldone, Harris, and Sanyol 2005; Lewicka 2008). The concept of place attachment has been argued to include three components: affective, cognitive and behavioral (Kyle, Mowen, and Tarrant 2004). However, the affective component is usually emphatic to the others. For example Hernandez et al. (2007) define place attachment as an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe. Lewicza (2008) also points out that awareness of the place history intensifies place attachment. Low and Altman (1992, p.3) suggest that place attachment is a complex concept that incorporates a variety of analogous ideas such as topophilia, place identity, insideness and sense of place. They see it as an integrating concept that involves patterns of attachment, places that vary in scale, specificity and tangibility, different actors, different social relationships and temporal aspects (Low and Altman 1992, p.8).

Within the psychological stream of place research, place attachment has been conceptualized as having two components, namely place identity and place dependence. Place dependence has been conceptualized as the subjective quality of a person’s perceived strength of association with the place. It is a more functional aspect of place attachment, often based on a utilitarian decision-making process, with little or no emotional involvement. Place dependence has two components, namely the quality of the current place and the
quality of other substitute places that are comparable to the current one. Place is viewed as a setting where the individual engages in some activity to meet a set of particular needs (Smaldone et al. 2005).

Place identity can be used for two different purposes. First, it can refer to the place’s own features that guarantee its distinctive character and continuity in time; place uniqueness (Lewicka 2008, p.211). Second, it can be viewed as a component of personal identity, as the process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Hernandez, et al. 2007; Stedman 2002). Thus, it can be used in connection to the people living in the place when they use the place in their self-identification. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) identify four processes through which people express their identity with and through places: distinctiveness (people use place identification in order to distinguish themselves from others), continuity (the place provides a sense of continuity of the self), self-esteem (people feel proud of the place) and self-efficacy (qualities of the place that facilitate everyday life of people in various ways). These principles of identity form the bases for local attachment.

The concepts of place attachment and place identity are closely linked (Chow and Healey 2008), and differences between them remain complex. Indeed, Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace and Hess (2007) identify four different stances regarding the relation between place attachment and place identity. First, several authors consider them to be the same concept and either use them synonymously or operationalise attachment in terms of identity (Stedman 2002). Second, some consider them inclusive of one another, for example Smaldone, Harris, and Sanyal (2005) have conceptualized place identity as a component of place attachment. Third, place attachment and place identity are seen as dimensions of a supra-ordered concept, such as sense of place (Stedman 2002). Finally, it is suggested that place attachment is a multidimensional construct that incorporates factors such as identity, dependence on place and social bonds (Kyle, Graefe, and Manning 2005).

Sense of place can be regarded as a broader and more encompassing concept than place attachment, as it also includes identity and dependence (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001). While it also refers to attachment, it indicates at the same time a more subjective way of feeling and experiencing the place. This can be seen in Hay’s (1998, p.5) argumentation, when he emphasizes that sense of place differs from place attachment in terms of the former considering the social and geographical context of place bonds and taking into account the senses of the place, such as aesthetics and a feeling of dwelling, in addition to the social and geographical context of place bonds. However, some writers have conceptualized sense of place in a similar way to place attachment (Smaldone et al. 2005).

Sense of place does indeed give meaning to the specific place. Agnew (1987) describes that meaningful places emerge in a social context and through social relations. They are geographically located and at the same time related to their social, economic, and cultural surroundings. They give individuals a sense of place, a “subjective territorial identity.” Thus, sense of place highlights the subjective and the insider’s way of sensing the place, in other words rootedness can be used to describe the concept (see Tuan 2003). Similarly, Durie, Yeoman, and McMahon-Beattie (2005) connect the sense of place in to the history of a nation thus following Lowenthal’s (1985) ideas of the strong role of historical roots, authenticity and nostalgia in creating the sense of place.

Our initial conceptualization follows the framework presented by Jorgensen and Stedman (2001), where sense of place is viewed as encompassing concepts of place attachment, place dependence and place identity. Sense of place goes beyond place attachment by extending to the social, cultural and historical context of the place and also emphasizing the multisensory and emotional conception of the place. Further, place dependence and place identity are seen as components of place attachment. Place identity is understood as a two-part concept including the view of it as a part of a person’s identity (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996), and as a place’s uniqueness. Figure 1 pulls together the core theoretical concepts.

The empirical findings further build up the understanding of these theoretical concepts and their relations as well as the meanings related to the best living place.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this study was gathered in a competition instigated by a development project entitled “Good Living 2010”. People were asked to vote for the best place to live in Finland in 2006. The voting was conducted through web pages and votes were gathered in two phases. In the first phase, people were asked to suggest places and justify why their suggested places should progress to the second phase. In the second phase, the respondents were asked to vote for the best place to live from a shortlist of 12 places. The question was formed: “Tell us why the place you chose is the best in your opinion.” Altogether 4988 votes were cast, 1286 people voted for a small village in western Finland called Sulva. These
1286 open-ended written justifications form the dataset of this study. The answers varied from one word such as “best,” to 226 words, while most answers were a few sentences long. People integrated different meanings for their own purposes. For some people, it was enough to say they live in the village themselves or that the village is beautiful or safe. Some people used many more words: “In Sulva past and present times meet seamlessly. Premises and gardens are well taken care of. People are friendly, there are a lot of activities for young and old. The municipal economy is in order, there are no political contradictions. Childcare and schools are well organized. There are good connections to Vaasa” (42/14).

We employed a qualitative content analysis when working with the data. The meaning themes were identified through an inductive analysis so that the multiplicity of different meanings could be captured (Miles and Huberman 1994, pp.55-58; Strauss and Corbin 1990, pp.62-74 and 98-115). First, the data was read a number of times and coded initially in a descriptive form. Gradually the first level codes were merged into broader meaning themes. The meaning themes and their relationship with each other were compared with earlier theoretical models and our own theoretical model was developed. The data was coded separately by three coders, who discussed the themes identified with each other during the analysis.

This kind of competition data is authentic talk and thus interesting for research. However, as secondary data often has some restrictions, also in this case some limitations should be born in mind. The competition format asks the respondent to justify why some place is the best. This probably directs the answers to be positive in nature. Only a few justifications included partially negative comments. In addition, the inclusion of the word “best” might have directed answers away from simple description. The internet competition situation might prompt people to offer meanings that are quick and easy to write. Further, one might ask whether the answers are true or false. However, this is not an important question as we are interested in how people justify their choices. Therefore, these answers also show the socially approved ways to justify the choice of the best living place. That is, place-related meanings are regarded as socially constructed and created, developed and contested as a part of social and cultural meaning structures.

MEANING THEMES RELATED TO SULVA

We begin our empirical analysis by describing the meaning themes identified from the data. Our analysis seeks to answer the question: What kinds of meanings characterise Sulva? We begin by interpreting the social meanings related to the place, then move on to functional-related meanings and close with meanings related to environment.

The Theme of Social Meanings

The first meaning theme reflects social meanings, which are classified into three levels: home, communality and culture. The meanings related to home are quite private and self-related meanings (Gustafson 2001; Csiszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). They come up in quotations such as “Sulva is my hometown, it is a pearl on earth” (23/3). These meanings also reflect the cultural normative way of thinking, as it is often taken for granted that the home place is the best place. Well-known phrases such as “Home sweet home” and “Home is where the heart is” reflect these kinds of culturally shared meanings. Moreover, the argument is very straightforward and rational, the person who lives there, should know the place better than anyone else (even if the knowledge is very subjective). Adjectives like cozy, welcoming, comfortable and idyllic can also be grouped under this theme. The emotional and personal expressions like “feel good,” “safety” and “peaceful,” “child-friendly” reflect the home-related meanings as they provide reasons for why a person has emotional bonds to Sulva and is rooted in the place (Kyle and Chick 2007).

The next level of this meaning theme is communality. It relates to the social nature of the living place. Similarly, Gustafson (2001: 9-10) connects these meanings to the relationship between self and others. The data revealed arguments like: “People are friendly here.” “People talk and say hello to everybody” “Good neighbors who help when we are traveling” and “Everybody is like one big family.” One important finding related especially to Sulva is the bilingual nature of the village. The official languages of the village are Swedish and Finnish and both are naturally tied together in the everyday lives of the residents. People cited the bilingual culture as a reason for the broader liberalism of the village. People used to dealing in two languages on a daily basis tend also to share important values like multiculturalism and internationality. The next citation expresses the communality and liberality of the place: “Bilingualism, multicultural values and tolerance are the natural side-effects that come from the progress of Sulva.”

The third meaning level is labeled culture. Like bilingualism, the village’s cultural history is also one of the unique features of Sulva, and was discussed extensively in the open responses. One of the most common arguments was that “old and new are combined together.” This point specifically refers to the living history museum and cultural centre of Stundars, located in Sulva village. People appreciate that the preservation of traditions was truly valued and cherished and they regard it as important to be rooted in the place in which they live. “The small-scale and practicability of former times mark out the houses and outbuildings. I guess it forms a tie into our past and creates a feeling of togetherness as well, both to the former generations and to the people living today” (2/13).

The Theme of Functional Meanings

The second theme is termed functional meanings. It communicates both the different functions and the utilization of space in Sulva, on a level that is not as personal and emotional as above, but is more practical and observable. These meanings are classified into three levels: residence, services and location that extend in a form of spatial coverage.

The meanings related to residence were those mentioning specifically the functional aspects of buildings and accommodation, which were described as numerous, functional and suitable for everybody. Even when the unique nature of Sulva’s architecture and historical buildings were emphasized, it was also argued that Sulva is a place that is approachable for everybody and anyone can move and live there.

The second meaning level is termed services. The meanings related to services were found in references emphasizing the sufficiency of available services: “There are all the functions which you can hope for a good living place available in Sulva.” Not just the amount, but also the quality of the services available in the village was appreciated. In addition to the services supporting everyday living, the existing cultural and leisure services were highlighted, for example, the football area “Swembley,” horse riding areas, the library and cultural center. However, services were also discussed in connection to the bigger town, Vaasa, which is located next to Sulva. The closeness of Vaasa was seen to compensate for any possible shortage of services, as the next citation shows: “A very cozy village where you can find services but live at the same time in the country. Nearby is Vaasa, where you can find all the rest of the services, when you need them.”

Indeed, the third meaning level is termed location. As mentioned above, it was discussed in connection to service supply, but
also more generally in connection to the geographical location of Sulva. Sulva was praised for its location close to the city of Vaasa, close to the countryside and also near an airport and motorway. The airport makes it possible to be easily connected to the rest of Finland, Sweden and the whole world, as the next two citations emphasize: “An idyllic countryside village close to the town (Vaasa) and with good travel connections” (62/1) and “My best friend also lives here and we can quickly get to concerts in Stockholm” (17/6).

The Theme of Environmental Meanings
The third theme reflects the meanings connected to environment. Following Tuan’s (2003) conceptualizations, we connect this meaning theme especially to the concept of space as it is defined as more open and free than a place is. These meanings are classified into three levels: built environment, natural environment and atmosphere.

The first level of meanings concern people’s descriptions of the built environment. The houses and their environment are described as beautiful and cozy. Children are seen as playing in big gardens, close to neighbors and the center of Sulva. “Elegant houses and gardens.” (5/19) People described how the architecture combines old and new in an aesthetic manner. “In Sulva old and new architecture is combined in a good way. Sulva is living countryside!” (23/6). The Ostrobothnian building style was valued and thus preserved in the area. There is a museum area called Sundars exemplifying traditional building styles, and those styles of building have also been used in more modern houses. At the same time there are new, more modern houses and newer living areas. “Peaceful, lovely environment. Beautiful buildings” (17/2).

The second level of meanings concerns the natural environment. It is used as a justification in various ways. First, Sulva is described as being located in the country. Second, the countryside is described as being nearby and as having some interesting natural attractions. The Söderfjärden area and fields nearby are used by thousands of birds during the spring and autumn migration periods, providing not only a special opportunity for birdwatchers but also bringing wild-life closer to everyone. “The area is active countryside and it is very peaceful in a positive manner, even though it is close to city. Here one can find all necessary services within a small distance. Also nature is very close and there is a very rich animal life. Finland hardly has another place where so many cranes can be seen in spring and autumn (22/6). Third, respondents described the leisure activities available such as skiing, hunting, bird-watching and picking berries.

The third level of environment includes the description of the atmosphere in the area. This is in line with Gustafson’s (2001) findings of the special atmosphere or the climate of the place—the area is described as communal, because people do things together and there is a sense of community spirit. Motivations include nuanced descriptions of what Sulva is like, such as peaceful, beautiful, idyllic, secure, humane, spacious, quiet and clean. “You can sense the spirit of this village!” (36/5). In this way the place becomes a state of mind.

The Conceptual Construction of Sense of Place
Based on our data we suggest that place identity, place dependency and place uniqueness arise from reciprocal interaction between social, functional and environmental meaning themes. The perception of place identity is embedded in the interaction between social and functional meanings. Place dependency has its origins in the interaction between social and functional meanings. Finally, place uniqueness arises from the interaction between functional and environmental meanings. While place identity and place dependency require a person’s experience and an insider view, place uniqueness reveals an outsider’s point of view. Functional and environmental meanings can be observed by an outsider and so result in a perception of a place’s uniqueness—even though the person questioned is not an insider. All the meaning themes and the conceptual construction of sense of place are depicted in Figure 2.

Our framework can be evaluated in connection to prior frameworks presenting the dimensions or meanings of places. One of the most influential frameworks is provided by Gustafson (2001). He classified the various themes of meanings related to important places under three broad themes: self, others and environment, emphasizing the interaction between the three themes. While Gustafson
denotes the theme of others as one theme, our data suggests that the meaning theme of social meanings includes both the subjective way of sensing the place, and the communal and cultural meanings related to it (see Tuan 2003; Hay 1998).

Moreover, our framework places more value on the different levels of each meaning themes. Different levels indicate both spatial and temporal extension of the meaning themes. The meanings break out from their concrete physical objects and extend to different states of mind, where places become spaces.

**Finding the Types of Reasoning for Asserting the Superiority of a Place**

Next, we focus on showing the underlying types of reasoning used to convince other people of the superiority of Sulva. We are interested in a manner of speaking—how people speak about the place (in parallel with meaning themes that elicit what people speak). The types of reasoning feature heavily our empirical data for two reasons. First, the data is focused on argumentation, and this is why the comments people enter on the competition form are specifically selected to make an impression on the jury. Second, as our data reveals, most of the comments were written by people living in Sulva or having some other close connections to Sulva. Therefore, the comments can be seen as a display of Sulva as a part of their self-identities. Figure 3 illustrates the types of reasoning used to justify the superiority of the place.

We label the first type as **belonging**, to indicate the close relationship between the person and the place. It emphasizes an affective manner of reasoning. Comments like “I live there” show how people use this function to argue why some place is the best by using their own subjective experience. Also Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) have identified self-esteem as one of the dimensions of place identity. It comes close to belonging as self-esteem according to Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) can be described as people’s pride in their living place.

The second type is called **convenience**. It refers to the flexibility and smoothness of daily activities. It is very practical type of reasoning. This type comes close to the self-efficacy, which is related to the person’s ability to carry out their daily functions and activities in the specific environment (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996).

The third type is called **distinction**. By that, we refer to the evaluative and comparative nature of the justifications. The meanings of Sulva were described in terms of other places, both implicitly and explicitly. Usually this was done in connection to size, infrastructure, and the spatial and multicultural nature of the place. Similarly, Gustafson (2001, p.13) views distinction as one of the underlying dimensions organizing the meanings of places, as he regards it as a basic human feature in making categorizations between places.

The fourth type is called **convincing**. Citations like “Sulva is a place where people are willing to move in” or “Sulva is one of the healthiest places in Finland, regarding both the alcohol/drug use, mental health and the overall happiness! (21/13), reveal that argumentation is built on more objective and evidence-based evaluations. The person seeking to convince adopts the role of expert.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study brings out three conclusions. First, based on our theoretical and empirical analysis, a conceptual model of sense of place is proposed. It proposes the concepts of place identity, place attachment and place dependency arising from reciprocal interaction between social, functional and environmental meanings.

Second, as our empirical data reveals, there is no single characteristic that produces the best place to live. The meanings used to express why Sulva is the best are numerous and varied, even though the place in question is a very small village. It seems that these meanings involve things close to everyday life; for some people it is the beauty of nature, for others the friendly neighbor or leisure time activities. Also, it seems that the best place to live includes multifaceted “both-and”-aspects that enable people to connect with the place. For example; because it contains both historical and new buildings, or is both close to city and close to nature.

Third, not only the meanings attached to the place varied greatly, but also the type of reasoning used to bring out these meanings. Belonging, convenience, distinction and convincing are proposed as types of reasoning behind the assertions of the superiority of the place.

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