

Making sense of place according to lived experience

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Abstract

The ways that multiple interests come to be represented in park and natural resource management need improvement. While a great deal of warranted attention is given to technical issues in land-use decision-making, there are other forms of knowledge that are useful in their own right and context. In this chapter it is suggested that various experiences, memories, emotions, and political interests of stakeholders may be constructively approached through stories of lived experience that, when shared, can create new places and new possibilities for managers-as-stakeholders.

The traditional scientific perspective that strives for objectivity and adherence to prescript hypotheses continues to be necessary and useful in land-use decision-making. With regard to concepts of place that have been applied in this manner, studies of place attachment have been particularly useful in shedding light on featured attractions of important outdoor places (e.g., Hammit, Backlund & Bixler, 2004; Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003; Warzecha & Lime, 2001). Myriad useful applications of place attachment are described throughout this volume. The theory suggested here is not meant to detract from the usefulness of a traditional scientific perspective. Instead, this chapter focuses on a particular scenario by which another perspective – the lived experience perspective – can aid land-use decision-making.

In seeking to democratize land management - as is implicit of America's public land management agencies - there is a need to understand public sentiment and public involvement. In his book *Coming to Public Judgment*, Daniel Yankelovich (1991) describes a scenario in which the general public's "responsibilities for governance are being usurped by 'creeping expertism'" (Yankelovich, 1991, pp. xiii). Accordingly, the ability for those in positions of power (e.g., park and wild land managers) to relate to a larger public who care deeply about the consequences of the decision-making process (i.e., stakeholders) is continually eroding. Put succinctly:

"It is sometimes difficult to believe that the public and policy-making experts in the U.S. share the same language and culture" (Yankelovich, 1991, p. 3).

The result of this trend is an increasingly widening chasm between public representation and expert-based decision-making. If the aim is to flatten the decision-making structure, the ability for a public to represent itself is crucial.

Many public land-use decision-making platforms include a peculiar subset of individuals who become involved in planning dialogue as representatives of larger stakeholder groups that are in attendance at, and sometimes organize, public forums. These individuals are charged with representing the interests and political ideology of a larger stakeholder group. These individual stakeholders, who are primarily vocal in local planning processes, have the ability to expand dialogue by sharing the experiential knowledge that defines their important places and how they come to be represented.

It is a difficult position for an individual to represent the interests of an organization while offering a very personal story of their lived experience. As a result stakeholders readily defer to standardized ideological representations in a dialogic space that traditionally assumes the

supremacy of empirical or scientific knowledge. This scenario hampers land-use planning and policymaking when stakeholder dialogue is unable to move beyond historically entrenched and at times embattled rhetoric. By sharing stories of lived experience the emotions that define place and spur political participation may find productive entrée into stakeholder dialogue by being sensitive to both the disjoint between individual and group representation and the expert-public gap.

Lived experience, memory, and place making

Lived experience refers to a series of temporal, spatial organizations that in its most basic form involves our immediate consciousness of life prior to reflection (Dilthey, 1985; Sartre, 1957). Lived experience - so defined - exists only in its representation and does not exist outside of memory (Denzin, 1992). The relationship between memory and the lived experience is at the center of knowledge production in coming to understand people's important places. Accordingly, to understand peoples' lived experience and how their important places are represented through the sharing of their stories, the role of memory and processes of remembering need further articulation.

The only way we can come to know and understand our lived experience(s) is through acts of remembering, and we share stories of our lived experience(s) through processes of telling and/or retelling. Further, recollection is not merely reduplicative, but socially influenced (Bartlett, 1932/1967; Durkheim, 1924/1974; Halbwachs, 1941/1992). We engage in memory-making processes in which the people and places of our lived experiences shape our memories and our stories. We make memory and we make places by sharing our stories. It is through social interaction (Schwartz, 1989) that place meanings – derived from memories of the lived experience - are represented to a broader audience. As we tell stories of our experiences and what it's like to be in a place we are constructing memories and sharing them in some fashion. We make memory and we make places by sharing our stories.

The process of memory construction is imaginative (Denzin, 2001) as the act of remembering is something that happens in the present but is referencing an absent past (Huysen, 2003). Condensation, elaboration and invention are common characteristics of ordinary remembering (Bartlett, 1932, p. 205). Further, the ways that we condense, or streamline our memories and stories, is constantly in flux.

Memory is an active process, and not something that is passively received by the individual. Anthropologist James Wertsch (2001) describes the functional relationship between the individual and society using 'mediated action' (Wertsch, 1998; Vygotsky, 1987) as a theoretical foundation. The theoretical framework of mediated action holds that the cultural tools made available to the individual by society mediate all human action. While cultural tools are made available by society, they are actively consumed and usually transformed through use patterns introduced by the individual (Wertsch, 1998). We choose what we remember and how we represent those memories.

The ways we choose to remember and retell our stories is both a social and emotional process. The individual sentiment is transformed in the association of individual sentiments that comprise the *sui generis* collective sentiment (Durkheim, 1924). Halbwachs (1941) suggests that while individual memory is constructed within a group perspective (i.e., the collective), the collective memory is realized through the memory of the individual. In this sense the group can't express itself separately from its individuals (Bartlett, 1967). This suggests that the

individual memory is constructed by the individual based on the influence of the collective memory, and in turn, contributes to the collective or social memory of the group to which the individual belongs. Understood as such, the construction of memory is an ongoing process (Bartlett, 1932; Halbwachs, 1941; Wertsch, 1998) through which individuals can represent collective, or group sentiment.

Historian John Bodnar describes this process in terms of ‘public memory’ (Bodnar, 1992). Public memory is something that is continually created while at the same time drawn upon, to bring the past, present, and future together in ways that are relevant. Bodnar writes:

“Public memory is produced from a political discussion that involves not so much specific economic or moral problems but rather fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very meaning of its past and present. ... Its function is to mediate the competing restatements of reality these antinomies express. Because it takes the form of an ideological system with special language, beliefs, symbols, and stories, people can use it as a cognitive device to mediate competing interpretations and privilege some explanations over others.” (Bodnar, 1992, pp. 14)

In marrying the idea of an expert-public gap with that of public memory, it may be understood that sharing stories of lived experience can refocus dialogue from a traditional scientific perspective while offering a way of mediating multiple perspectives and interpretations.

Investigating place meanings and/or senses of place can improve stakeholder dialogue when lived experience and the subsequent implications are made explicit. While many representative stakeholders have a firm grasp of traditional science they all have experiential knowledge. When the management areas of interest serve as a setting through which the individual has passed previously, memories and stories of their experience provide insight into their important place meanings. When these stories are shared among stakeholders - as exemplified in the chapter in this volume dedicated to ‘learning circles’ (Stewart, Glover, & Barkley, in progress) – it is a form of place making by which emotional knowledge may become formalized to the advantage of stakeholder dialogue. The lived experience perspective is critical in creating a public memory that is sensitive to the emotional knowledge that both catalyze political ideology and give meaning to place.

Creating memories and places by sharing stories of lived experience is a way to address what political scientist Martin Nie (2003) recognizes as a history of stagnant dialogue in natural resource planning that is consistently relegated to simplified, historically embattled stakeholder ideologies. When representative stakeholders haven’t had the chance to share their stories with one another they haven’t defined a shared stock of knowledge from which to draw. In this case they continue to draw more exclusively from their ideological moorings while participating in an expert-based dialogue.

Place, ideology and understanding public desire

We make memory and we make places by sharing our stories. Place meaning or sense of place fits with land-use decision making according to stories of lived experience told by and among politically active stakeholders. It is through social interaction (Schwartz, 1989) that place meanings – derived from memories of the lived experience - are represented to a broader audience. As we tell stories of our experiences and what it’s like to be in a place we are

constructing memories and sharing them in some fashion. Place meanings shared among politically active stakeholders to park and natural resources management are a way that managers-as-stakeholders can come to understand the emotions that typically ride high in park and natural resource planning and policymaking (Nie, 2003; Freudenburg & Gramling, 1994; Johnsen, 2003; Lynch, 1993).

The basic theoretical underpinning of sense of place or place meaning, as referenced interchangeably here, is Tuan's (1972) notion that space becomes place as a result of an emotional transformation. To understand place meanings is to understand emotional transformations of space to place. Like place meanings, political ideology is the result of emotional transformation (Lerner, 1947). As political scientist Daniel Bell points out,

"... What gives ideology its force is its passion. ... One might say, in fact that the most important, latent, function of ideology is to tap emotion. Other than religion (and war and nationalism), there have been few forms of channelizing emotional energy. ... Ideology fuses these energies and channels them into politics" (Bell, 1962, p. 400).

With strong feelings for the places of interest and how they should be managed, politically active stakeholders are positioned at the emotional nexus of land use decision-making. These emotionally charged stakeholders - representing themselves and their affiliate interest groups - have the capacity to refocus dialogue in ways to which we the public can relate.

Our democratic processes need to be equipped to make sense of the emotional energy that catalyzes both politicized ideology and political action. With emotions playing a crucial role in expanding stakeholder dialogue it is important to further conceptualize them so we may explore representational strategies that move beyond politically simplified meanings of place. The sociology of emotion identified here as particularly relevant focuses on two modes of lived emotion: feelings of the lived experience, and feelings while telling about them (see Denzin, 1985, who referred to these as the "lived body" and "intentional value feelings," respectively). Feelings of the lived experience are directly applicable to the goal of formalizing emotions in park and wild land planning processes. Feelings of the lived experience immediately associate the individual with their environment in ways that are accessible to a broader audience. Denzin (1985) describes feelings of the lived experience and their ability to foster a shared understanding, as an:

...orientation to the interactional world of experience, they are accessible to others and they can furnish the foundations for socially shared feelings.....Others are able to vicariously share in the subject's feelings. ... The subject can communicate and 'give' these feelings to others, thereby allowing them to enter into a field of emotional experience with him. (p. 230).

These feelings give meaning to places and are told in stories of the lived experience. Further, these types of feelings are commonly understood, as we all have lived experiences.

Feelings associated with the telling of lived experience are also easily available to others, and these "are felt reflections, cognitive and emotional, about feelings" (Denzin, 1985, p. 230). In other words, this second mode of emotions is the result of reflecting on our experiences and telling about them selectively according to a political and ideological framework. These two kinds of emotions, that is, feelings of the lived experience and feelings in the telling of them, provide appropriate footing for engaging and understanding stakeholders' emotions embedded in

their experiential knowledge of place. To seek and interpret emotions as characterized by these two modes provide a means to expand stakeholder dialogue in ways that concurrently build trust and understanding.

We all have lived experiences and so we have an empathetic charge toward that of others. We can understand how people feel and how they express themselves when they are talking about something with which we are familiar. By centering stakeholder dialogue on lived experience we increase the capacity for what environmental historian Keith Basso (1996) has described as ‘place making’. In describing the process of place making, Basso writes:

“... place-making is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here.’ For every developed place-world manifests itself as a possible state of affairs, and whenever these constructions are accepted by other people as credible and convincing – or plausible and provocative, or arresting and intriguing – they enrich the common stock on which everyone can draw to muse on past events, interpret their significance, and imagine them anew.” (Basso, 1996 p. 6)

Discussing lived experience and creating public memories is a way to ‘enrich the common stock’ of representative stakeholders while keeping tabs on emotional place meanings that, along with our memories, change over time.

It is important that the feeling of our experiences, the emotions that catalyze our political participation, find a more productive form of representation in land-use decision-making. Lived experience, as a philosophical orientation toward knowledge and knowing reality, holds central the idea that through the actual experience of something its essence may be felt and understood as reality (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Place, political ideology, and the emotion enmeshed in both are identifiable through sharing stories of lived experience. Stakeholders who represent larger constituent groups in planning processes feel strongly about the decisions that are made in managing their important places. That they care enough to subscribe to a political ideology and become vocal representatives for a larger group locates these individuals at an emotionally laden crossroads. Sharing stories of their experience in these places they hold dear is a way to shift the focus of stakeholder dialogue away from historically entrenched rhetoric while focusing on important and personal place meanings. In so doing, stories of lived experience shared among stakeholders can present new possibilities in shaping decision-making forums.

In a technical report entitled *Understanding Concepts of Place in Recreation Research Management* (L.E. Kruger, T.E. Hall & M.C. Stiefel eds., 2008), Stokowski (2008, pp. 31-60) describes a history of research and theory on place as a social construction that is both emotional and constantly in flux. Accordingly, Stokowski extends Tuan’s (1976) emotional transformation of space to place in necessitating the communicative precipitation of place. In championing the sharing of experiential knowledge in place-making processes Stokowski extends a charge to managers-as-stakeholders:

“A manager’s imperative then, should be to understand the emergent qualities of place-making and place meanings in order to respond to patterns of discourse shaped by structured communicators linked across social networks. In this effort managers should err on the side of variety rather than constraint in allowing resource settings to be as open as possible to social and cultural behaviors through which place meanings may be expressed.” (Stokowski, 2008, p. 54)

As it has been described here, the malleable nature of place meanings or senses of place is in accord with humans' changing experiences, feelings, and memories. How we feel about the people and places of our past and present shape our memories and our stories.

Sitting at the crossroads of public representation and land-use planning, representative stakeholders should be afforded an opportunity to share their experiential knowledge of the area. This is in keeping with the imperative of a manager-as-stakeholder to, "understand the emergent qualities of place-making and place meanings in order to respond to patterns of discourse shaped by structured communicators linked across social networks" (Stokowski, 2008, p. 54). As these representatives discuss their lived experiences in these important places the door is open for important emotional knowledge to further become a part of public memory. By sharing these stories, a public memory may be forged and a place made that can present new possibilities for the future that are in closer keeping with public desire.

A snapshot of place: sharing and interpreting stories of lived experience

When researching place meanings, or sense of place, lived experience inquiry seeks to draw out memories of the lived experience that are rooted in particular locations. The method(s) employed will ideally prompt memories of the lived experience in the place(s) of interest to the researcher(s). Photo-based methods are well suited for eliciting memories and stories of lived experience that are place-based. Particularly, the use of participant/stakeholder photographs to guide conversation has been a strategy used in place research to elicit memories and stories of lived experience (Stedman, Beckley, Wallace, & Ambard, 2004; Stewart, Liebert, & Larkin, 2004; Stewart, Barkley, Kerins, Gladdys, and Glover, 2007). Told from their point of view, both literally and figuratively, stories generated from talking about participant photos foster a shared emotional field of experience. This shared field of experience can extend beyond one-on-one conversations. An example of group sharing or collaborative learning is described in this volume in terms of "learning circles" (Stewart, Glover, & Barkley, in progress). In this chapter the authors describe instances of shared discussion among co-participants about their own and each other's photos. These photos prompted memories and stories that when shared, led to civic discovery and new ways of understanding. The role of photography is central to this type of dialogue for its ability to ground representation in the experience and memory of the participant/storyteller.

Participant photographs act as a prod for experiential memory (Harper, 2000). In being asked to discuss their photos, participants recall their experiences and tell stories in ways that create the places of these experiences. The points at which photos were taken are implicitly important to the participant, as they have intentionally turned their gaze on them and etched the record in a photograph. By talking about their own photos, people remember and discuss spaces through which they have passed and their experience in passing. They discuss their lived experience of place in ways that tap emotional knowledge (Douglas, 1998; Klitzing, 2004; .

This type of study is particularly relevant when the participants are individual stakeholders – who by definition are emotionally driven - representing larger constituent groups. The ability to see and discuss stakeholder's important pictures from their perspective, both literally and figuratively, is an appropriate way to elicit stories of lived experience. Understanding these stories to take shape according to emotions that comprise both place and political ideology, it is appropriate and useful for representative stakeholders – so defined – to take and discuss their photos in attempts to expand stakeholder dialogue.

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