Perspective Essay

Making sense of 'place': Reflections on pluralism and positionality in place research

Daniel R. Williams*

USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Fort Collins, CO 80526, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Place research has roots in several loosely related critiques of positivist epistemologies.
- Place offers a framework for comparing pluralistic positions on knowledge and meaning.
- Describes inherent, instrumental, sociocultural, and identity layers of place meaning.
- Norms for sensible place-making may be grounded in place as *bios*, *ethnos*, and *demos*.
- Understanding place requires access to both objective and subjective views of reality.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on critical pluralism and positionality, this essay offers a four-part framework for making sense of the manifold ways place has been studied and applied to landscape planning and management. The first element highlights how diverse intellectual origins behind place research have inhibited a trans-disciplinary understanding of place as an object of study in environmental planning and management. The second focuses on ontological pluralism as found in attempts to make sense of place meanings by (a) fleshing out four layers of place meaning that vary in terms of tangibility, commonality, and emotionality and (b) critiquing four methodological approaches to identifying place meanings. The third looks at making sense of place-making as a way to highlight ontological and epistemic pluralism in studies of the material and social-discursive practices that create, govern, and transform places. In particular it draws attention to the way place meanings, knowledge, and practices are always situated or positioned. The fourth highlights axiological or normative pluralism as reflected in various prescriptive notions of place-making as the outcome of deliberate efforts of people to try to shape, contest, and/or otherwise govern the landscape. These include place as *bios*, *ethnos*, and *demos* as normative ideals for prescribing what constitutes a good place and underscores the challenge of adjudicating across different conceptions of sensible places. This paper concludes by reiterating the ways that place research and practice can benefit from both a critical pluralist perspective and a heightened awareness of the diverse positionalities occupied by observers of and actors in the landscape.

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"[The] problem [is] how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, that person and his viewpoint included. It is a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive the world as a whole" (Thomas Nagel – The View from Nowhere, 1986, p. 3)

1. Introduction

Making sense of *place* in landscape planning and management has proven a formidable challenge. Over the past four decades a surfeit of place concepts has found its way into scientific research and popular discourse intended to describe people–environment interactions. Studies addressing such concepts as *place, sense of place, place attachment, place identity, place dependence, rootedness, genius loci, topophilia*, and *place-making* can be found in countless disciplinary and applied fields devoted to the design, planning, stewardship, and restoration of places that vary in kind and scale from homes, neighborhoods, and cities to parks, ecosystems, and

* Tel.: +1 970 498 2561.
E-mail address: drwilliams@fs.fed.us

landscapes (Beatley & Manning, 1997; Stewart, Williams, & Kruger, 2013; Vanclay, Higgens, & Blackshaw, 2008). Adding to the complex mix of empirically based scholarship on place, a diverse assortment of environmental activists, educators, designers, and planners has also adopted place ideas to provide prescriptive guidelines for promoting sustainable lifestyles (Ardoin, Schuh, & Gould, 2012) and protecting or improving communities, landscapes, and ecosystems (Beatley & Manning, 1997; Hayward & McGlynn, 1993). In addition to these descriptive and prescriptive interpretations of place concepts, within the domain of landscape planning and management there are at least two overlapping modes or levels of application. One centers on how people experience places. It aims to chart place-based meanings and sentiments as embodied in concepts such as special places, sense of place, and place attachment held by residential occupants, visitors, tourists, and other stakeholders (Claval, 2005; Gustafson, 2001; Manzo, 2005; Skår, 2010; Smith, Davenport, Anderson, & Leahy, 2011; Stedman, 2008). Another level emphasizes context sensitive governance of places, landscapes, ecosystems, etc. (Collins, 2014; Fischer, 2000; Kemmis, 1990; Stewart et al., 2013). Where the former generally addresses the *content* of place meanings, senses, etc., the latter focuses on *social processes* by which meanings are produced, consumed, and contested (Ganapathy, 2013; Larsen, 2008; Yung, Freimund, & Belsky, 2003).

The goal of this paper is to offer a framework for making sense of the manifold ways place has been studied and applied to landscape planning and management. In this endeavor two key philosophical commitments guide my analysis. First, I adopt a *critical pluralist* standpoint which holds that no one research theory or program by itself can successfully engage the various facets of place inquiry and bring them together into one view of reality (Patterson & Williams, 2005; Williams, 2013). In seeking to understand the world from multiple, competing vantage points, pluralism engages the various perspectives and reveals assumptions that are otherwise difficult to identify from within any particular vantage point. The critical part of critical pluralism means that critical reflection should also be directed at how well theory and methods are aligned with the stated objectives of the research. As a corollary to critical pluralism, the second principle is to recognize the subjective and unavoidable *positionality* (as opposed to "gods-eye" objectivism) of all observer-actors in the world. As suggested by the opening quote from Nagel, positionality holds that all observers may attain only a partial or incomplete comprehension of the world due to their embedded and inevitable positionality within any particular province of spatial–temporal reality. This applies both to so-called objective scientific observers who seek to stand apart from the world and to people going through their daily lives embedded in concrete places. In other words, our human-situated interaction with the world – whether by history, culture, geography, experience, or embodiment – conditions how we can understand it. This varied positioning means that while there is no unified platform from which all knowledge can be gathered and integrated into a single understanding, the concept of place does offer a powerful framework from which to comprehend and compare pluralistic positions through which awareness, knowledge, and meaning are generated.

To explore the implications of pluralism and positionality for place research and planning practice, this essay is organized around four perspectives or lenses that constitute different ways to read the phrase "making sense of place" (cf. Vanclay et al., 2008). First, read as "making sense of *place*" highlights how the diversity of intellectual origins behind place research has inhibited a trans-disciplinary understanding place as an object of study in environmental planning and management. The remaining three ways of making sense of place attend to different kinds of pluralism underlying place research. Thus the second perspective focuses on ontological and epistemological pluralism found in attempts to "make sense of *place*

meanings" by critically examining varying approaches to assessing place meanings or senses of place that people form through everyday interactions with places. The third perspective focuses on "making sense of *place-making*" as a way to highlight ontological and epistemological pluralism in varying accounts of the material and social-discursive practices that create, govern, and transform places. In particular it draws attention to the way place meanings, knowledge, and practices are always situated or positioned. The final reading, "making *sensible* places," turns to axiological pluralism as reflected in various prescriptive theories for what constitutes "good" places and place-making strategies as planners and others deliberately to try to shape, contest, and/or otherwise govern the landscape. This section describes a range of normative ideals for prescribing what constitutes a good place and underscores the challenge of adjudicating across different conceptions of "sensible places" and place-making. The paper concludes by reiterating the ways that place research and place governance can benefit from both a critical pluralist perspective, which heightens awareness of the diverse positionalities occupied by observers of and actors in the landscape, and understanding place-making as a normative practice in landscape planning.

2. Making sense of *place*

The central difficulty in making sense of place as an object of study in environmental planning and management is that it has tangled roots in several loosely related critiques of positivist epistemologies, modernism, and instrumentalism that surfaced in the early 1970s (Williams, 2014). First, place research is most often traced to the emergence of humanistic geography as an anti-positivist critique of mainstream geography's reduction of place to little more than location and container of human action (Relph, 1976). Second, an important but less recognized geographic influence on place research arose with the "radical" geographies and post-structural critique of positivist geography's inattention to the structures of power that make and contest place (Harvey, 1973). Third, place research was influenced by sociological concerns about the decline of community and neighborhood in the face of modern mass society (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Fourth, from psychology came various critiques of cognitive information processing theories of the mind in which the environment was reduced to a source of stimulus information rather than a locus of meaning (Bruner, 1990; Stokols, 1990). Fifth, much like the psychological critique, planning theory began to question the focus on instrumental or utilitarian models which viewed the environment as a means for promoting behavioral and economic goals to the neglect of deeply felt sentiments, symbolism, and identities tied to places (Appleyard, 1979). Finally, though not tied to place per se, a movement in consumer behavior emerged to challenge both instrumentalism and information processing explanations of buyer behavior, emphasizing instead a relational metaphor focused on hedonic and symbolic consumption, attachment to possessions, and identity affirmation (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Taken as a whole, these various critiques were crucial to expanding the focus of environmental planning beyond what Nagel (1986) described as the "view from nowhere" and engage a *view from somewhere* or "the perspective of a particular person inside the world" (p. 3). When viewed as a somewhere, place is more than a backdrop for social action or container of potentially malleable attributes of separable and independent utility. The result is to reassert the importance of context, local conditions, and place-specific culture and experience in shaping knowledge, meaning, and well-being.

Despite these basic commonalities, the varied intellectual origins underlying place thinking have also contributed to considerable ambiguity regarding just what is meant by place. Early

work within environmental psychology and the design fields relied heavily on a framework in which place was conceived as the confluence of actions, conceptions, and the physical environment (Canter, 1977). But this framing paid little attention to the locational aspects of places. In contrast, geographers typically point to three facets of places: location; materiality; and a relational, ideational, and/or phenomenological facet variously described as meaning, attachment, or sense of place (Cresswell, 2004; Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2011). First, places have geographic location, which distinguishes the idea of place from mere physical reality or environmental setting. While places are located or positioned in relational space, they have fluid, human-imposed (socially negotiated) boundaries and are embedded in and embed other places of larger and smaller scales. Second, places have material form or features that distinguish them in space as a locale or material setting for social relations. These material features are both natural and built. Third, what most differentiates how human geographers talk about place from other spatial terms and categories is that places have significance because humans come to know them and invest them with meanings, ideas, and sensibilities. Though various terms such as *meaning, sense of place*, and *place attachment* are often used broadly to refer to the ideational facet of place, this does not mean these terms necessarily reflect the same underlying phenomenon. Rather, used broadly they merely point to the ideational aspects of places as distinct from their location or material qualities.

Gieryn (2000, p. 455) captures this framing quite succinctly: "Places are not only materially carved out of space but interpreted, narrated, understood, felt, and imagined – their meanings pliable in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested." In many contexts the reference to *meaning* may also include various forms of knowledge and beliefs (ideas) about a place (including scientific and traditional or local forms of knowledge), as well as deeper, more emotional, and symbolic relationships between a person or group and a place. A national park like Yellowstone is not merely a collection of unusual geological (material) features located in the western part of North America, but an iconic symbol of the American identity, the place where the idea of creating national parks was born. For many visitors it is also a locus of significant memories of times spent on summer holidays with family. Moreover, these meanings are often expressed in stories – historical or other narrative accounts of peoples and cultures that have occupied or otherwise experienced these places. In fact, places typically have multiple, often conflicting histories that shape and define cultures and individual identities. In other words, places organize and constitute human/social relations, power, and actions. Much the same could be said of the concept of landscape, typically referring not only to the visual manifestations of geographic spaces, but also their cultural and historical significance. A significant challenge underlying landscape planning and management is somehow accounting for these meanings, understandings, and relationships in landscape assessments. Much of the confusion among those who study place comes down to different assumptions about how to conceptualize and operationalize this meaning or "ideational" element of place.

3. Making sense of *place meanings*

Recognizing how places embody various meanings, senses, ideas, and understandings is particularly crucial to investigating place-making in landscape planning and management. Unfortunately, meaning is a notoriously difficult concept to operationalize in the human sciences as evidenced by the multiple, overlapping, and conflicting positions embedded within and among philosophy, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication, and rhetoric. Rather than engage directly such complex

philosophical terrain, place researchers have often sought handy refuge in some previously established operational definition (e.g., as a cognition or attitude) regardless of its suitability to the question under investigation (Patterson & Williams, 2005). Not only has this contributed to frequent lamentations over terminological confusion and inconsistency in place research (e.g., Relph, 2008), more importantly, it has forestalled much needed critical refinements to the conceptual and empirical literature. Rather what is needed is for investigations to be more clearly embedded in conceptually coherent frameworks that guide any given investigation of place meaning. The aim is not to eliminate multiple conceptions of place, but rather to acknowledge plurality and positionality in order to avoid leaving the faulty impression (a) that a satisfactory accounting of meaning is accessible through some singular methodology and (b) that methods function as passive instruments for rendering place meanings, when in fact they impose structures on observations that shape what counts as meaning (Williams & Patterson, 2007). The discussion below can be read as a call for more rigorous and transparent explication of philosophical commitments and implications of one's chosen methodological standpoint.

To begin to excavate some of these conceptual differences, Fig. 1 presents a framework for characterizing forms of meaning based on varying ontological and epistemological assumptions (Williams & Patterson, 1996). The framework employs Fournier's (1991) three dimensions of meaning (tangibility, commonality, and emotionality) to organize the plurality of ideas that constitute place meaning as existing in four layers. These vary from surface meanings that are tangible and widely shared or experienced regardless of culture to deeper, intangible meanings that are more personal. The first layer describes places as possessing some degree of *inherent meaning* that transcends any one culture and reflects essential or material properties of a place that most people would perceive. The concept of inherent meaning builds on the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the adaptive paradigm in environmental psychology, which regards perceptual systems as having evolved specifically to perceive and attend to (show interest in) specific kinds of information in the environment (Saegert & Winkel, 1990). Because these meanings are largely determined by material features of the place they can be objectively identified in ways that generalize from place to place. For example, some places are theorized to be preferred, pleasant, or useful based on innate adaptive relationships between the organism and its environment as opposed to being learned or social acquired (Patterson & Williams, 2005). In the context of landscape and urban planning some explanations for scenic or restorative qualities of places are theorized as inherent responses to places and landscapes (Karmanov & Hamel, 2008).

The second layer involves *instrumental meanings* associated with material properties of places that contribute to satisfying desired behavioral or economic goals of an individual. From this perspective, humans are rational planners who select the best options within a system of socio-physical opportunities and constraints. Ontologically instrumental meanings imply more individual volition in prioritizing needs, but the relationship between the place and its need fulfilling potential is largely determined by tangible attribute-utility contingencies. For example the instrumental goal of fishing may be voluntary, but the practice itself is contingent on the presence of water and fish. In epistemic terms an individual's goals may be subjective and contextual, but the relationship between a place feature and the potential to meet any given goal can be more or less objectively defined and is potentially generalizable across places that possess similar features.

The *sociocultural* layer of place meaning shifts the focus from inherent and instrumental forms of meaning towards a view of meaning as socially or symbolically constructed within the cultural, historical, and geographical contexts of day-to-day life.
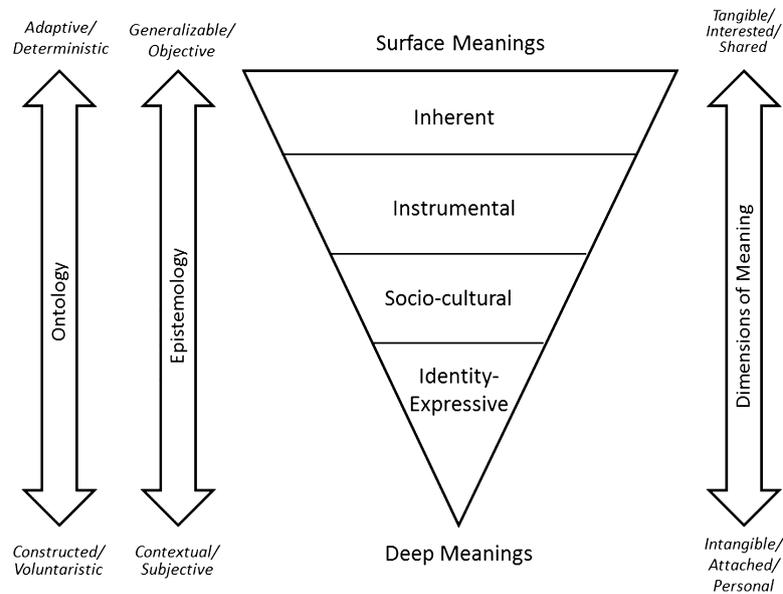
Fig. 1. Layers of place meaning.

Socio-cultural meanings serve to identify people with groups and cultures. One early example comes from Lee's (1972) study showing how neighborhood parks often act as social territories to symbolize ethnic group identities. In contrast national parks typically symbolize middle class meanings such as society's commitment to protect some of its unique natural heritage. Sociocultural meanings are not mental constructs, but rather are seen as socially constructed through language and social interaction. Though they communicate shared norms and expectations about a place, the extent to which any one person holds or identifies with these meanings may vary as noted below.

The *identity-expressive* layer of meanings also emphasizes a socially constructed and more narrative or voluntaristic view of reality, but gives greater emphasis to how individuals become attracted to and even attached to a place because such places possess intangible emotional, symbolic, and spiritual meaning. In other words, the study of expressive meaning is even more deeply rooted in a contextual and subjectively oriented phenomenology, emphasizing individual level processes and a recognition that individuals have the potential to assign idiosyncratic (personal) meaning to places. With time and involvement in places individuals begin to construct and affirm a sense of self. Beyond the cultural and historic meaning of Yellowstone National Park, for example, the place may come to hold deep and cherished personal meanings for an individual due to important experiences in that place. The places we frequent often help to express or communicate to ourselves and others "who we are" (Van Patten & Williams, 2008).

Fig. 1 helps us to appreciate that meanings come in a variety of types, but it does not identity the particular meanings of any given place. Again as Gieryn (2000, p. 455) reminds us, place meanings are "pliable in the hands of different people, malleable over time, and inevitably contested." But the framework also illustrates how some layers of meaning are more negotiable and open to contestation than others. Thus while some forms of meaning may generalize from place to place and person to person, most are likely to be specific to certain people in a given place. To investigate the particular meanings of a place researchers have deployed a range of methodological lenses through which meanings are rendered and catalogued. These different lenses or positions are typically more sensitive to some kinds (layers) of meaning than others. The brief description of methodological approaches described below is not

meant to be exhaustive, but to illustrate some of the implications of different methodological positions in assessing meaning in terms of their fidelity to the epistemological critiques that initiated place research in the 1970s.

3.1. Phenomenological approach

Early work on place meaning built on the philosophy of phenomenology in an effort to open up the discipline of geography to the largely neglected examination of human beings who, through their intentional acts of living in the world, create and interpret meaning (Entrikin & Tepple, 2006). In opposition to the dominance of positivist epistemologies in geography, phenomenologists maintain that a holistic understanding of place as experienced is not attainable through quantitative means (Relph, 2008). Similarly phenomenology has been popular within architecture and the planning fields as a way to reveal the authentic experience or character (or spirit) of a place, often premised on the idea that places have essential or genuine meanings, but through modernity and/or globalization are at risk of being lost. A source of confusion surrounding phenomenology applied to place meanings is that it often appears to be approached at two conceptual levels. One is as a general reference to the phenomenological experience of place as distinct from an abstract, scientific description of place (Relph). The other level is as a specific form of investigation which shares much with hermeneutics and other interpretive methods (Patterson & Williams, 2002). As a research tool the former typically seeks the invariant or essential quality of lived or embodied experience of place (e.g., Seamon, 2014). The latter is more akin to interview based methods interested in understanding how individuals actively engage in construction of meaning through narrative and story-telling (e.g., Skår, 2010) and thus has much in common with social/discursive perspectives (see also Section 3.4). Phenomenology has been subject to harsh criticism from post-structural and social constructionist perspectives as essentialist, voluntarist, and inattentive to social structure and power (Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1993).

3.2. Semiotic approach

Semiotics comes into play when human geographers and (landscape) architects equate place to a form of text that can be

read for meaning (e.g., Claval, 2005). Semiotics focuses on the relationship between signs and the things to which they refer or denote, i.e., meaning. Though related to the field of linguistics as the study of the structure and meaning of language, semiotics goes beyond language to also investigate non-linguistic signs such as objects, buildings, places, and landscapes observed via visual and other sensory modalities. For example, Claval examined the meanings behind farmers' crop systems using semiotics as a tool to decipher farmers' readings of the landscape. Criticism of semiotics shares much with critics of phenomenology in arguing that semiotics overlooks power and privileges agency, but also fixates on the visual and iconic of places and landscapes to the effect of obscuring the complex social processes through which people collectively make places and cultivate certain values, attitudes, and practices (Boogaart, 2001).

3.3. Cognitive/information processing approach

In contrast to the phenomenological focus on invariant meanings as revealed in the lived experience of place and semiotic examination of place as text, much of the work on place meaning originating in environmental psychology has drawn from cognitive or information processing approaches that regard meanings as equivalent to cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, or other mental representations about a place as perceived by an individual. Among the strongest contemporary advocates of this approach is Stedman (2008), who aims to operationalize place constructs in precise and quantitatively generalizable ways. Accordingly, the "key to translating sense of place – and especially meanings – through social psychology is the idea that the physical setting and its attributes take on the role of an attitude object or locus of cognitions and evaluations" that can be translated into "descriptive statements about 'what kind of place this is'" (Stedman, p. 66). As a result it has become quite common in the literature to adopt the formulation that sense of place has two facets: meaning and attachment. Accordingly, meaning can be operationalized as a set of cognitive beliefs and attachments can be operationalized as a set of one or more attitudes variously labeled attachment, identity, and/or dependence (e.g., Smith et al., 2011). The expressed virtue of operationalizing place meanings and sense of place quantitatively is to bring much needed "analytical clarity to the discussion of meaning" otherwise lacking in phenomenological approaches (Stedman, p. 65). However, any benefit derived from the kind of operational precision and generalizability made possible by the cognitive approach comes at the high price of returning to a technocratic/instrumental view of the environment that provoked the critical engagement of place in geography, architecture, and environmental planning at the outset (Williams, 2014; Williams & Patterson, 2007).

3.4. Social/discursive approach

The cognitive approach to place meaning popular in environmental psychology has been criticized for lacking any serious discussion of how power and social and cultural processes influence the experience, meaning, and relationship to places (Gustafson, 2001; Manzo, 2005). Some of this criticism was foreshadowed by Bruner (1990), who advocated an interpretive approach to cognition in noting that participation in culture depends upon "shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (p. 13). Similarly Dixon and Durrheim (2000) draw on discursive social psychology to critique environmental psychology for defining place-identity as "individualistic, mentalistic, uncontested and apolitical" (p. 31) and instead emphasize how place-identity constructions are rhetorically or discursively accomplished. This work builds on the idea that one can understand place meaning and identity by examining how people

construct their worlds through their own accounts and descriptions as gleaned from interviews or natural conversations (Di Masso, Dixon, & Durrheim, 2014). Discursive social psychology pointedly challenges information processing approaches and related mental entities such as beliefs and attitudes. Rather than seeing attitudes and cognitions as predictive of behavior, subjects are seen as deploying various discursive positions from among a repertoire of interpretive frames, scripts, or tropes to account for their meanings and actions (Van Patten & Williams, 2008). Such a view of meaning, according to Antonsich (2010), is more suited to the problem of understanding meaning as a phenomenological element of place as envisioned by humanistic geographers than the cognitive approach. But in addition it begins to addresses the criticism that phenomenology has been insufficiently attentive to socio-political processes of place-making. On the down side, Di Masso et al. readily acknowledge key limitations of the discursive approach, in particular the importance of emotional embodiment and material practices in constructing place meanings.

In keeping with critical pluralism, it is hard to imagine a single paradigm, research program, or assessment approach that does justice to all that is meant by place meaning. Places are, by definition, unique such that their meanings need not fall neatly into some categorical inventory or generalize across people, other places, or time. Rather the differing approaches described above serve to alert us to a broader array of potential characterizations of meaning. They help us understand what potentially counts as meaning and appreciate the range of methods we might deploy to identify meanings. Any single research investigation offers a selective account of meaning, at best identifying some important or overlooked meanings, but not *the* meanings of a place.

With the noted exceptions found in the social/discursive approach, most place meaning studies in landscape planning offer static descriptions and assessments without much consideration for how meanings come into existence and change. To overcome the philosophical conundrums and terminological ambiguity that continue to cloud the literature requires moving beyond empirical snapshots of place specific meanings to focus more on the social and political processes of place (meaning) making. In the following two readings the focus shifts from describing the content of place meanings to the explicit consideration of meaning-making as social processes that can be analytically described and explicitly practiced, respectively.

4. Making sense of *place-making*

As an explanatory exercise making sense of *place-making* is at the core of human geography. Broadly speaking, it refers to "the set of social, political, and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live" (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 54). In this context the question is not what sorts of meanings are attached to a place, but to understand conceptually or empirically how people fashion their world into places. This fashioning involves both material practices by which people physically transform landscapes and build homes, streets, and cities as well as social/discursive practices such as experiencing, naming, planning, consecrating, and managing places. The place-making actions of individuals, groups, and organizations can vary from the everyday acts of individual consumers (e.g., as tourists) to the potentially more consequential and deliberative acts of communities, corporations, and government agencies (e.g., in developing and promoting a tourist destination).

Pluralism in accounts of place-making involves both ontological and epistemological commitments in which place refers both to an object in the world and to a way of understanding or seeing the world (Cresswell, 2004). Ontological commitments have generally split between the experiential-phenomenological approaches

strongly associated with humanistic geography (Relph, 1976) and relational approaches often associated with radical, post-structural geographers (Massey, 1993) and actor-network theory inspired approaches to place-making (Murdoch, 1998). The former tends to conceive place as a product of a bounded, localized, and subjectively experienced history, which underwrites much of what passes for sense-of-place studies in environmental planning (e.g., Smith et al., 2011; Stedman, 2008). It tends to focus on static inventories of place meanings. The latter characterizes place as a relational, networked, fluid, and politically constituted phenomenon (Antonsich, 2011; Cresswell, 2004; Murdoch, 1998; Pierce et al., 2011). It tends to focus on the social and political processes through which people create and contest meaning and is much more sensitive to the role of networks and power in shaping place discourses. The relational view, while increasingly regarded as the dominant paradigm in human geography (Antonsich), is far less common in environmental planning (for exceptions see Larsen, 2008; Yung et al., 2003). The failure of investigators to be sufficiently sensitive to the discursive history behind phenomenological versus relational understandings of place exacerbates confusion in the applied literature on place and place-making as they carry very different normative implications for landscape and urban planning (see Section 5).

Place-making as the subject matter of human geography has been a much discussed source of epistemological pluralism, which arises from the different ways observers and actors are culturally, personally, and geographically situated or positioned in place. As Entrikin (1991, p. 3) describes it, geography has long suffered from "a confused relation between the universalizing and particularizing discourses that have characterized the study of place." From a subjective, locally situated (particular) perspective individuals act as autonomous agents who assign meanings to places in relation to their particular goals and projects. From an objective, universal perspective individuals are socially constructed within a contingent intersection of often conflicting discourses and practices. To resolve this tension Entrikin explicitly adopts a pluralist position, arguing that to "understand place requires that we have access to both an objective and subjective view of reality" (p. 5). Building on Nagel (1986), he describes an epistemic position of "betweenness" that is informed by both the decentered, objectivist point of view (e.g., the view of a scientist or planner) and the centered, subjectivist point of view of individual agents who are always and necessarily "situated" in the world. "From this position ... we gain a sense of both being 'in a place' and 'at a location,' of being at the center and being at a point in a centerless world" (p. 134).

Also building on this notion of betweenness, Sack (1992, 1997) characterizes the process of place-making using what he calls a relational geographic framework (see Fig. 2). Not only does it help us understand place-making as "a fundamental means by which we make sense of the world" (1992, p. 1), it can also be used as a framework for characterizing the various forms of pluralism and positionality discussed throughout this paper. This framework starts by dividing the forces that create places into three ontological categories. These are depicted on a horizontal plane as the confluence of nature (or materiality), social relations (e.g., social norms, economic relations, political processes), and meaning (e.g., various sources of belief and value ranging from scientific knowledge to religion). In the vertical plane Sack presents a fourth place-making force of awareness or perspective. This epistemic perspective describes how awareness varies geographically between "views from somewhere" (centered, subjective, everyday experiences of limited generality) and "views from nowhere" (decentered, objective and generalizable perspectives). The idea is that our awareness of place involves multiple perspectives or positions ranging from an intimate, embedded (centered) view from somewhere to an abstract, remote (decentered) view from nowhere. Not only do positions vary between somewhere and nowhere, as illustrated

in Fig. 2 pluralism also operates across perspectives within and between science/knowledge, experience/meaning, and social relations/norms.

Sack uses the image of an inverted cone rising and expanding above the horizontal plane to illustrate how the process of moving from the highly subjective and holistic experience from somewhere to the more disembedded view from nowhere leads to more objective awareness and abstract knowledge. Still with this expanded awareness of place, any one view or position also becomes more fragmented and specialized and less holistically informed. Fig. 2 includes examples of various kinds of scientific knowledge, social relations, and meanings organized at various levels of contextual specificity. Each lens illustrates various positions or standpoints reflecting different ontological, epistemological, and axiological leanings. The example of scientific ecologies – drawn from Allen and Hoekstra (1992), which describes six distinct "ecological criteria for observation" that constitutes "objective" ecologies – is contrasted with localized and subjective "sacred ecologies" (see Berkes, 2008). Experiential perspectives discussed earlier and normative perspectives to be discussed in the next section of this essay are also illustrated in Fig. 2.

5. Making *sensible* places

When read as "making sensible places" the focus turns from analyses of everyday practices of place-making to the promulgation of intentional practices guided by various normative (axiological) theories of what makes a place good, authentic, sustainable, etc. In the realm of organized practices such as environmental planning, community development, and education better (sensible) place-making is often promoted as an intentional goal (Beatley & Manning, 1997; Hayward & McGlynn, 1993). One of the better known examples is the Project for Public Spaces, which draws from a range of literatures in health and well-being, community development, and environmental ethics to promote its particular vision of sensible place-making as "a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces [for] creating good public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well being" (PPS, 2013). Likewise some environmental education programs seek to foster a sense of place as "a geographically based connection... that can motivate place-protective behavior and engagement among residents as well as visitors" (Ardoin et al., 2012, p. 584).

In realm of practice axiological pluralism refers to the varying normative guidelines or ethical foundations for making more sensible places, often articulated as enhancing, protecting, or restoring the presumably genuine meaning (character or personality) of a place. Philosophically, normative systems may range from the technical lenses of economics and decision science (e.g., utilitarian ethics); to legal-political systems and institutions and moral-ethical systems embedded in culture, religion, and local custom; to moral philosophies (e.g., virtue ethics, deontology, etc., see Fig. 2; Sack, 1997, pp. 217–233).

These differing prescriptive norms for establishing "sensible", sustainable, or good places add yet another layer of complexity regarding what people mean by meaning and sense of place. Advocates for creating, maintaining, or restoring some particular (normative) sense of place have often justified their views without very explicit recognition of the diversity of positions (both descriptive and normative) associated with the label "sense of place" (e.g., Beatley & Manning, 1997). Looking across a wide range of disciplines and discourses, however, one can find at least three major normative ideals for guiding "sensible" place-making (Barnett & Bridge, 2013; Crawford, 1995; Entrikin, 1999; Thayer, 2003). Two of the labels I will use were suggested by Entrikin, who contrasted
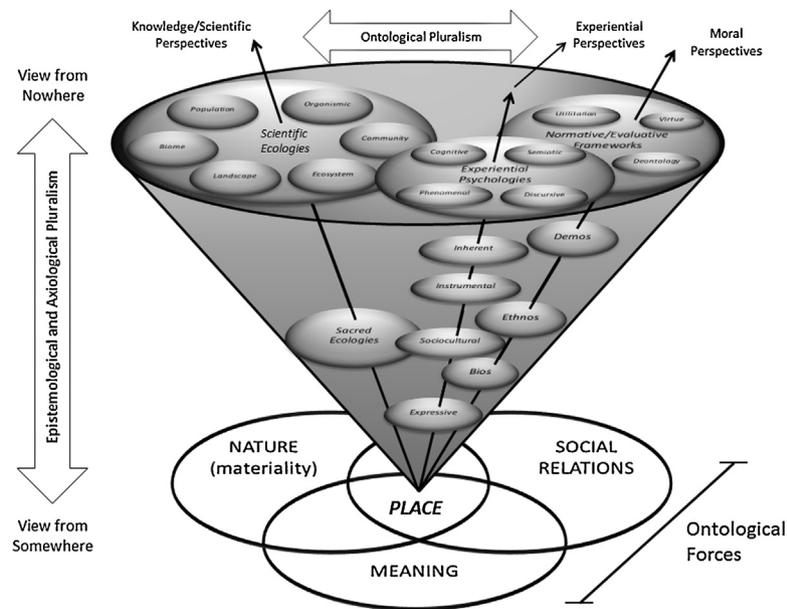
Fig. 2. Examples of ontological, epistemological, and axiological pluralism and positional lenses based on Sack's (1992, 1997) relational geographic framework.

norms grounded in place as *ethnos* versus place as *demos*. But first, I begin by describing another normative form: place as *bios*.

Place as *bios* builds on the idea that environmental problems are symptomatic of a lost or forgotten sense of place. This line of argument is particularly evident in the philosophy of bioregionalism which asserts that economic, social, and political life can be more sustainably organized around "authentic" natural regions through the cultivation of decentralized, self-sufficient, and self-governing communities (Thayer, 2003). Thayer writes that the "recognition of a life-place, or bioregion [means] the acceptance of the need for us all to reassemble the world by integrating the natural dimensions of each of its various regions with a deepening sense that we inhabit a specific place" (p. 6). Rejecting economic globalization, bioregionalism is premised on a presumed authentic biocentric (natural) way of acting and dwelling in the world and works to reestablish closer linkages between ecological processes and cultural practices. Greater alignment between political and ecological boundaries is seen as a way to "restore" the lost art of living in place and learning to re-inhabit or become native to a place.

Second, building on a communitarian political philosophy, place as *ethnos* refers to shared ways of life, identities, and parochial attachments (Entrikin, 1999). Accordingly, communitarian social movements seek to strengthen local solidarities and shared histories and identities through commitment to a common set of values, norms, and meanings that define social differences and boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Just as bioregionalism tends to idolize the local as a way to enhance ecological sustainability, communitarians defend the virtues of the local on the basis of their presumed thicker ties of tradition and custom as the basis for political unity. Applied to politics, Kemmis (1990) has argued for a communitarian style of local governance that depends less on a set of procedures, regulations, and bureaucracies and more on local patterns of relationships and human virtues conceived as "a set of practices which enables a common inhabiting of a place" (p. 122). As another bulwark against the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, communitarians regard human fulfillment and social order as necessitating the kinds of secure attachments and moral frameworks that local communities presumably offer.

Equating sustainable places to the promotion of certain normative ideals – whether anchored in nature or community – has been harshly criticized for being exclusionary and anti-democratic

(Crawford, 1995; Mitchell, 2003). Harvey (1996) rejects both *bios* and *ethnos* as modes of political thought for their "inward-looking, exclusionary, and even neo-fascistic" (p. 199) tendencies. Such thinking, he argues, builds on essentialist readings of local natural and cultural history with presumptions that "bioregions are given by nature or by history, rather than that they are *made* by a variety of intersecting (social and ecological) processes" (Harvey, p. 202). Harvey similarly expresses doubt that decentralized communitarian societies necessarily respect such positive enlightenment values as human diversity, democracy, freedom, and justice. Still, Harvey's argument that strong place-based identities often stand in the way of emancipatory politics is tempered somewhat when considering how many indigenous communities with strong traditions and localized identities nevertheless find themselves highly vulnerable to culture loss brought on by globalization and translocal place-making (Castree, 2004; Ganapathy, 2013).

Thus as a contrast to *bios* and *ethnos*, some geographers have tried to articulate the idea of place as *demos* – characterized as a progressive, cosmopolitan, or global sense of place (Massey, 1993) – as the basis for a "political commons" in an increasingly globalized world dominated by plurality and difference (Antonsich, 2011). Massey argues that real places often lack the singular, coherent qualities often attributed to bioregional or communitarian senses of place and instead host plural identities, which are the source of both richness and conflict. This more dynamic, plural, and relational view of place has the capacity to honor the human need for authenticity and rootedness while recognizing that such sentiment need not become an exclusive enclave. Framed as *demos* good places require an egalitarian ethos built on a cosmopolitan conception of place that is both "rooted in the concreteness of everyday experience and practice" and at the same time open to a world beyond the local and supportive of universal ideals of "a common humanity striving to make the earth into a better home" (Entrikin, 1999, p. 280). In sum place as *demos* builds on a vigorous critique of the ideal of a public sphere which presumes a pre-existing social unity (*ethnos*) as the basis for forming a polity (Crawford, 1995; Mitchell, 2003). It proposes instead a kind of agonistic theory of democracy in which contested meanings and policy debates are treated as opportunities for learning about social differences rather than suppressing them and thus

encourages participants to transform their particular interests into wider appeals for justice (Barnett & Bridge, 2013; Collins, 2014; Young, 1996).

My central point here is that reconciling the different norms used to guide the design or governance of places is not just a debate about which meanings are at stake, it is also a question of the appropriate social processes and institutional arrangements by which society evaluates and adjudicates competing meaning and identity claims. From a critical pluralist perspective there is no best set of norms to guide place-making. As lifestyle models bioregionalism and communitarianism have much to recommend, but as political projects they are less attractive because they presuppose some natural or authentic basis of agreement. The challenge for landscape governance is how to draw strength from such plurality. On the one hand, the different normative perspectives need to be out in the open, widely acknowledged, and respected for what they are – competing conceptions of the good. On the other hand, open, vibrant democratic processes can be undermined by exclusionary claims of bioregional or communitarian authenticity. Rather what is needed is a capacity for shared learning – learning to co-exist in a shared space even if people share little else – a capacity buoyed by geographic proximity and economic interdependence (Young, 1996). Thus while a critical pluralist acknowledges and values different norms, the cosmopolitan norms of *demos* encourages a collaborative form of governance through participatory, pragmatic place-making (Williams, 2013).

6. Conclusions: repositioning place and practice

The diverse philosophical and disciplinary origins of place research continue to impede critical refinement within the larger domain as different research programs have been built on competing, but often unstated or unrecognized ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments. By examining different ways to make sense of place inquiry, this paper has sought to illustrate how the anti-positivist critiques that helped launch place as an object of study reflect diverse efforts by social scientists to reposition place inquiry to include the view from somewhere – in Nagel's terms "the perspective of a particular person inside the world" – in effect, to give greater recognition to the importance of context, local conditions, and place-specific culture and experience in shaping knowledge, meaning, and well-being (Fischer, 2000). Though technocratic institutions have traditionally privileged the view from nowhere, place research is partly motivated by a desire to account for the subjective world of day-to-day emplaced experience and knowing as part of a more inclusive scientific account of reality. This heightened emphasis on the importance of local context in making sense of place reasserts the role of the direct, subjective, and emplaced experience as a legitimate form of knowledge and meaning relevant to landscape governance and provides a foundation for advancing a place-based approach to environmental planning (Stewart et al., 2013).

Embracing critical pluralism enhances planning practice by recognizing and profiting from different kinds of knowledge and values produced by differentially positioned observers. It also operates by recognizing the diverse ways in which political communities order or choose among alternative courses of action and learn how to negotiate within and across these different kinds of pluralism. In other words, landscape governance requires social institutions that can recognize and negotiate among pluralistic conceptions of the good and address the political and pragmatic task of adjudicating among competing representations of a place that are produced as a result of ontological and epistemological pluralism (see Collins, 2014 for an example of place-based social learning in water governance).

Planning practice can be understood as a collaborative effort to work within and across various experiential, scientific, and normative conceptions of place – a task that acknowledges the diverse positioning of all concepts, approaches, and observers. This requires an approach to the intentional practice of place-making that conceives the larger spatial context:

"as a dynamic composite of places of differing scales that are being continuously made, unmade, and remade in relation to human projects. [These places] may be made unintentionally, through habit and custom, or intentionally through planning and forethought. They may be made undemocratically through fiat and the imposition of absolute power or they may be made democratically through collective discussion, planning, action, and participation of all those affected by communal decisions. They may be created through the official language of the state or through the alternative language of the dispossessed – a language that does not appear on maps but that constructs a geography of everyday life in marginalized communities" (Entrikin & Tepple, 2006, p. 38).

The place framework presented here highlights the role of pluralism and positionality in making sense of place with the aim of (re)positioning planning practice between a scientific/technical view from nowhere and an enriched experiential view from somewhere. It helps to articulate an approach to planning practice that cultivates greater recognition of place-specific experience and meaning and promotes collaborative sense-making and social learning. It also reminds us that, though various normative conceptions of place have been applied to landscape and urban planning, it is through diverse, collaborative, and often contested sense-making (place as *demos*) embedded in actual places that pluralism in knowledge, meaning, and value is ultimately reconciled.

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