Social work in the UK is based on an ecological understanding of people’s behaviour and wellbeing (ie taking into account interactions between individuals and the people and environments around them). In practice, social work focuses in on core elements such as children’s attachments to people but may not pay much attention to their attachments to places in their lives.

Here, evidence from other disciplines is used to demonstrate the fundamental links that exist between place, identity and wellbeing and implications for social work with children and families.

**Place, identity and belonging**

Places are spaces that possess meaning for people, making them fundamental to our identities and sense of belonging. In one study, participants from four countries ranked place equally important to other aspects of identity including gender, occupation and religion (International Social Survey Programme, 2003). Though the term ‘place’ is associated with a particular area (eg people might say they come from a particular town or part of a city), geographical and anthropological theory posits that physical locations do not hold inherent importance – it is our interactions with people and local environments over time, and the subsequent layering of memories, that are so important to our sense of place.

From birth, children develop attachments to people and places that are associated with positive experiences, providing the ‘secure base’ necessary for healthy development. Whilst a child’s parents/main carers are the focus of their attachments, the home environment is likely to provide the main source of their initial attachments to places. For some, however, it may be the site of traumatic experiences such as abuse and neglect.

**Place and wellbeing**

In a recent review of the evidence from a health geography perspective, Curtis (2010) identified three aspects of environments that have an impact on mental health:

- Material – natural features eg parkland, or the built environment
- Social – levels of friendship ties
- Symbolic – aspects of the environment important to individuals, groups or cultures.

Most important to this paper is the symbolic environment eg home, school or neighbourhood because people symbolically ‘invest’ parts of themselves in their surroundings in ways that underpin their sense of identity and belonging. Displacement may therefore be harmful because it threatens the sense of self which has been constructed in relation to the local environment, sometimes resulting in problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Vandermark, 2007).

**‘Out of authority’ residential care placements for looked-after children**

The trial of a network of men convicted of sexually abusing a group of girls living in the Rochdale area in 2012 brought to public attention not only the growing dangers of child sexual exploitation (eg Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2012) but also the widespread practice of local authorities (LAs) placing children in residential care outside of their ‘home’ area, often hundreds of miles away.

At the time, 45 per cent of children in residential care were placed outside of their LA. This ‘export’ of children occurred despite legislation in England (Children Act 1989; Children Act 2004) requiring LAs to make sufficient provision for all LAC in their area. As a result, large numbers were placed in residential homes in parts of the country where housing was cheaper and staff wages lower, with little apparent regard for the children’s connections to home. This practice demonstrated a lack of awareness of the importance of attachments to people and places in children’s lives, with the routine use of out-of-authority residential placements in some parts of the country resulting in large numbers of vulnerable children being exposed to increased risks to their wellbeing. These include not only the practical difficulties of maintaining contact with family, friends and trusted support workers, but also being cut off from familiar places which often play such an important role in children’s identities and sense of belonging.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that attachment to place plays a significant role in many people’s lives and that an understanding of place should inform assessments of the best placement for a child in care. As ever, these should take into account the child’s wishes, feelings and individual needs and consider the impact of a move away from a place they may be strongly attached to alongside the potential benefits of moving a child out of area.

**References**


