
Migration and Homelessness
Exploring Attachment to Place amongst Francophone, Anglophone and Indigenous People in Northeastern Ontario

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Abstract: Place and space are central to human ways of organizing the experience of living. Homelessness is an experience of displacement that profoundly modifies a person’s sense of self and place. This paper examines the forces that propel the flow of migratory homeless people into urban communities in northern Ontario, Canada. In order to advance knowledge in the area of place attachment among homeless migrants, the paper addresses three objectives: (i) to examine the proportion of migratory persons in the homeless population (ii) to describe the characteristics, including the gender, culture and language among homeless, migratory persons as well as their reasons for homelessness and migration and (iii) to explore the meaning of and attachment to places among migratory homeless persons. The study utilized quantitative and qualitative data gathered in Sudbury, Ontario. The data were from a period prevalence count of homeless people and focus groups with service users. In addition, an analysis of interviews with fifteen homeless individuals who had experienced migration was carried out to acquire a deeper understanding of their sense of place and belonging. The quantitative data, based on a sample of 349 homeless adults, revealed that 28% (n=98) self-identified as migrants. The profile of migrants indicated that they tended to be Aboriginal, male, absolutely homeless and without custody of dependent children. Analysis of place attachments among migrant homeless individuals revealed that various spaces were transformed into meaningful places when homeless migrants forged bonds with others and met their existential needs. The bonds migrant homeless individuals formed with places they inhabited were central to their identity and a sense of belonging; hence along with race, class and gender, elements of place should also be considered in virtually any study, particularly those examining issues such as power, exclusion, and inequality within society.

Keywords: Space, Place Attachment, Migration, Homelessness, Northern Ontario, Canada

INTRODUCTION

There is considerable theoretical and empirical diversity in approaches to the study of place attachment (Hidalgo and Hernandez 2001). Myriad terms such as community attachment (Crowe 2010), sense of community (Bathum and Baumann 2007), place attachment (Raymond, Brown, and Weber 2010), place identity (Chow and Healey 2008), place dependence (Pretty, Chipuer, and Bramston 2003), and a sense of place (Qian, Zhu, and Liu 2011) have been employed by different researchers indicating the complexity of the issue and some overlap in concepts used to discuss it. Place attachment implies a positive...
emotional bond characterized by a desire to maintain proximity to the objects (e.g., specific places) of attachment (Hidalgo and Hernandez 2001). Similarly, a sense of place suggests a socially, culturally and psychologically constructed person–place relationship which connotes a positive emotional bond between human beings and places (Crowe 2010). Place identity refers to the ideas that identity, self-esteem and sense of belonging are derived from various features of places (Twigger–Ross and Uzzell 1996). On the other hand, place dependence entails people’s functional reliance on amenities and resources for self-fulfillment (Trentelman 2009). Despite variations in terminology, these concepts imply that an affective bond with places derived from subjective meanings and memories is central to place attachment.

Individual and collective experiences, relationships and the broader social context shape the meanings associated with places (Hodgetts et al. 2010; Manzo 2005). Furthermore, people’s emotional connections to places and the meanings attached to them can stem from both positive and negative experiences (Manzo 2005). A sense of place or home can stem from beliefs about the relationship between self and place, feelings towards place, and the behavioural exclusivity of place in relation to alternatives (Jorgensen and Steadman 2001). Similarly, using a tripartite framework about place attachment, Scannell and Gifford (2010) argue that actors can be attached to places based on individual or collective meanings, psychological processes of affect (e.g., happiness), cognition (e.g., memories, meaning) and behaviour (e.g., proximity maintaining, reconstruction of place) as well as social (e.g., social symbols, relationships) and physical (e.g., natural and built) characteristics of a place.

People derive a sense of self from the places they inhabit and use for everyday living (Hodgetts et al. 2010). Place–based identities are evident in how often people tell others where they come from and who they are. Place identity suggests that people’s affiliation with places is part of how they want others to perceive them (Trentelman 2009). Such identities emerge through intimate understandings of settings derived from bodily placement and social interactions (Twigger–Ross and Uzzell 1996).

On the other hand, displacement, which refers to “the loss of a familiar physical or social environment” (Vandemark 2007, 241), has the potential to destroy the sense of self and identity among people. Displacement is experienced by homeless individuals, immigrants, people fleeing domestic abuse, refugees and those uprooted by war (Berman et al. 2009; Rosbrook and Schweitzer 2010). Loss of home is often a multidimensional experience affecting material possessions, safety, security, relationships, dignity and lifestyle resulting in emotional, financial and physical turbulence. Homelessness is an experience of displacement that profoundly modifies a person’s sense of self and place (Vandemark 2007). A homeless person loses his or her place/home in the world or a role within the society which may diminish the sense of self and belonging. Displacement is a significant dimension of homelessness as it influences physical, mental and behavioural spheres of human life. Often these spheres have crucial influences upon the re–entry into healthy and meaningful societal roles.

Given the existential significance of a sense of belonging and place, it is important to examine the meaning of and attachment to places among homeless migrants. Homeless individuals may develop a sense of belonging in spaces where they strive to meet their existential needs despite attempts at their removal from such places. In order to advance knowledge in the area of place attachment among homeless migrants, the present study has three objectives: (i) to examine the proportion of migratory persons in the homeless population in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada; (ii) to describe background characteristics based on gender, ethno/cultural background and language among homeless, migratory persons and; (iii) to explore the meaning of and attachment to places among migratory homeless persons. In this study the term place attachment implies an affective bond or link between people and specific places resulting from personal meanings and memories. Hence the term is congruent and intertwined with other terms including a sense of place, place identity and place dependence. Further the study incorporates a broad definition of place which may include proximate and distant material and social dimensions of places.
Moreover, we draw upon Vandemark’s (2007, 242) use of the term “locale” which constitutes the daily paths a person travels and the associated social networks. We use the term locale in this paper in a similar manner to refer to particular settings within the study community that are inhabited by our participants. The works of Foucault (1967) and other researchers who have examined the concept of place and place attachment have informed our interpretation of homeless migrants’ connections to place (Black 2002; McHugh and Mings 1996; Rosbrook and Schweitzer, 2010). Research can be helpful in providing for deeper understandings about the meanings and significance of place among homeless migrants, who face ever changing physical, social and relational contexts as they move to different settings or communities.

**Methods**

The current study utilizes data gathered over the course of a ten–year, mixed methods study of homelessness in Sudbury, Ontario Canada. This city, located in northeastern Ontario, has a population of approximately 160,000. We analyzed quantitative and qualitative data with the aim of examining the proportion of migratory persons among the homeless in Sudbury and of deciphering the meanings of and attachments to places experienced by migratory homeless individuals.

The quantitative data involved a period prevalence count of homeless people in Sudbury. This survey took place in a one–week period in February, 2009. The participants included individuals accessing front line services for homeless people. By gathering information about each individual using shelters and allied services for seven consecutive days, we were able to identify the number of repeat service users and unique cases, thus increasing the accuracy of the ‘snap–shot’ of homeless population of Sudbury (Kauppi et al. 2009). The number of unduplicated cases was 462 which included 349 adolescents and adults as well as 113 dependent children under the age of majority who were in custody of the study participants. The age range of the participants was 18 to 72, while the age range of their dependent children was under age one to age 17. In the present article, a subgroup of homeless migrants (n=98) was the focus of the analysis.

In addition to the survey, six focus groups with service users on the issues of homelessness and migration were conducted in the spring 2009. Separate focus groups with Francophone, Indigenous and Anglophone service users were conducted to obtain qualitative data about experiences and perceptions of migration, homelessness and place. Four to six participants attended each discussion group. A majority of the service users were men (two-thirds). The focus groups were conducted at agencies providing a range of services including shelters, outreach services, health and mental health services, drop-in services, emergency food services, and services for Francophone and Aboriginal people.

Additionally, thematic analysis of qualitative interviews conducted between 2002 and 2005 with 15 homeless individuals who had experienced migration focused on their sense of place and belonging. These homeless migrants included Francophone, Anglophone and Indigenous people. The age range of the interviewees was 16 to 44, and most were men (three-quarters). The names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms in order to conceal their identities. Also, the information shown in the parentheses after each verbatim quotation from the interviews indicates the ethno–cultural group (e.g., I=Indigenous, A=Anglophone, F=Francophone), gender (e.g., M=man, W=Women) and age of the participants.

**Findings**

The analysis addressed three aspects of migratory homelessness, including estimates of the proportion of homeless people who were migrants in Sudbury, the characteristics of homeless
migrant individuals, their pathways to homelessness and migration, and their sense of attachment (or detachment) towards places.

**Estimated Number of Homeless Migrants**

In estimating the proportion of migrant individuals among the homeless population, we drew upon a definition of migration proposed by Rahimian, Wolch, and Koegel (1992). This definition views migrants as those who have moved within the previous five years from one community to another. Individuals who have been in the community for less than one year are considered recent migrants, while those who have been in a community between one and five years are viewed as intermediate–term migrants. We also included long–term migrants (those who had moved to Sudbury more than five years prior to the study).

**Characteristics and Pathways**

A comparison of the background characteristics of recent and intermediate–term migrants (i.e. migrated within five years prior to the study) suggested that they were similar in a number of respects: a majority were men (69%), most did not have custody of any children (72%), and the cultural backgrounds reflected the linguistic and cultural composition of the homeless population in Sudbury with 54% being Anglophones, 28% being Indigenous people, 15% representing Francophones and 3% belonging to visible minorities. The main difference between those who had migrated within five years of the study and the long long–term migrants was that there were equal numbers of women (51%) and men (49%) in the latter group.

Most migrants (81%) stated that they were absolutely homeless as they had no place of their own in which to stay. In contrast, the remaining 19% were near homeless as they were at risk of losing their place of residence for a variety of reasons (e.g., pending eviction, extremely low wages, inability to pay rent or familial abuse). Notably, 33% of migrant homeless individuals had no source of income, while the remainder had some access to money through benefits such as social assistance, panhandling, busking or temporary work.

The migratory pathways were complex as some had travelled from multiple communities on their way to Sudbury. The majority (over three–quarters) of migrants had come from various regions in Ontario. While a few migrants were from outlying communities within the Sudbury area, the largest proportions had come from other northeastern Ontario communities or from southern Ontario. Participants identified several First Nations communities in the province of Ontario as places of out migration. A few participants migrated from other provinces in Canada, notably British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec and Newfoundland. Few homeless persons were migrating from another country; those from other countries were mainly from the USA, although a few reported coming from Indonesia and Zimbabwe. These findings provide some evidence to support the view that a convergence of the global north and south is emerging, even within a medium–sized urban centre of northeastern Ontario. However, the flow of homeless migrant people is mostly limited to those moving about within the province and secondarily to those migrating from one province to another within Canada.

While most intermediate–term migrants had not moved in the previous year, most of the recent migrants had moved at least once or twice and as many as eight times in the year prior to the survey. Recent migrants had been in Sudbury for an average of three months. On the other hand, intermediate migrants had been in Sudbury for an average 2.1 years. With regard to the number of moves in the previous five years, recent migrants had moved as many as twenty times. In contrast, the range of moves in the previous five years was up to seven among intermediate–term migrants. These findings indicate that there is considerable mobility among homeless migrants.
Attachment to Place

Attachment to place among migrant homeless people was interpreted in light of theories of homelessness, place and space (Foucault 1967) and the notion of home and migration (van der Klis and Karsten 2009).

Homelessness, Places and Spaces

Place and space are human ways of organizing the experience of living. Space embodies an infinite and abstract network that connects points and intersects with its own skein (Foucault 1967), while place refers to those spaces that acquire meaning through various activities aimed at the fulfillment of psychological and physical needs (Vandemark 2007). Homelessness is not simply an absence of a physical domicile; rather it involves the absence of or a reduction in social ties and a diminished sense of connectedness. Foucault (1967) introduced the term “heterotopias” as the antithesis of utopia. Heterotopias refer to places in which individuals, whose behaviour is considered deviant in relation to the established norms, are located. This idea is useful for understanding how homeless individuals are often excluded, marginalized and pushed out of spaces occupied by domiciled people in the mainstream population. Heterotopias presuppose a system of opening and closing that both make them penetrable but also isolate homeless persons. Hence when homeless individuals enter particular heterotopias such as social services, they are required to follow certain rules and regulations which lead to the experience of exclusion and inclusion at the same time. This situation was illustrated by our participant, Armand (M–F–61), who was experiencing mental illness and various physical ailments; he was placed in challenging circumstances in which he had been banned from the premises on which health services were offered for homeless persons. He stated, “I cannot depend too much that the system will take care of me. I have a responsibility for my health. It’s a problem—I have to take care of it.” His dilemma was that he was informed that he could obtain health services from a particular agency but was not permitted to enter the building. Armand’s experience illustrates the paradoxical aspect of deviation heterotopias that are simultaneously open and closed for homeless migrants. Services are supposed to be open since they exist to support poor and homeless people; however, the enforcement of particular regulations excludes certain homeless people, often those who are most vulnerable, from accessing such services.

Homeless individuals are required to reinvent themselves and re-establish a sense of place and belonging wherever they migrate or temporarily rest (Vandemark 2007). In their attempts to regain a sense of place and self, homeless migrants alternate between the opposing forces that characterize varied spaces; these include private and public space, family and social space, cultural and useful space, and spaces of leisure and of work (Foucault 1967). As homeless migrants attempt to manage their daily lives and establish connections with people, spaces are transformed into meaningful places and generate a sense of belonging and a sense of self or identity which most people take for granted (Vandemark 2007). This may be seen in the bonds that migrants often forge with other homeless persons from whom they derive a sense of belonging and identity when connecting with them. As stated by Mark [I–M–42]:

I talk to friends on the street that I know and people that know me really well. I get the news and [information about] other organizations ... [we] catch up and see how we’re all doing ... we support each other now.

Home and Migration

There is a unitary conception of home prevalent in the broader domiciled society which equates home with a socio–spatial system that represents enmeshment of a physical dwelling with material possessions and the social unit called household (van der Klis and Karsten 2009). However,
Black (2002) argues that the concept of home is not straightforward but rather is subject to constant reinterpretation. The idea of home is intimately linked to the concepts of identity, memory, territory and place. Nevertheless, a state of mind implying a sense of belonging and security may emerge from unconventional places, particularly among homeless migrants. This was evident in the narratives of many participants who lived off the land and preferred the outdoors to shelters or available short-term housing. Steve (A–M–26), Gilles (F–M–61) and Wayne (I–M–44) conveyed these attachments to outdoors. Steve stated: “most of the time I find a place outside to sleep....I am quite capable of sleeping outside.” Gilles mentioned: “I slept in the bush ‘cause I love the bush.” Wayne echoed a similar sentiment when he said: “the best place that I survived was in the bush ‘cause I was raised that way, everything was learnt on my own.” These perspectives on belonging and security, expressed by Francophone, Anglophone and Indigenous homeless migrants emphasize the need to expand the concept of home to include natural spaces. The work of Wynveen et al. (2011) and Manzo (2005) on meanings of place afforded similar insights about people’s relationships with a range of places including nature, large geographic regions and nations.

Additionally, significant sources of attachment to place involved family and friends. The narratives of homeless migrants showed that they had greater attachment to places occupied by family and friends and those containing helpful social services spread over multiple communities and geographic locations. Giselle (F–W–17) mentioned that she was attached to Sudbury because her boyfriend was in jail there and she could visit him twice per week. Some respondents seemed attached to certain areas within the city as they had friends who allowed them to stay at their home for a short duration. Others were attached to the city because their children were residing in Sudbury. These homeless migrants lived in the same city as their children but not with them which reflected a tension between autonomy and security needs. Some of them did not wish to be a burden on their children or other family members.

McHugh and Mings (1996) assert that people may experience evolving attachments and relationships with a place which may gradually become associated with a sense of home and belonging. This evolving and ambivalent relationship with places became apparent in the life trajectories of homeless migrants as they expressed positive and negative feelings in connection to different places. Positive experiences largely focused on the development of relationships centering on bonds with objects, persons, places or locales and signified attachment to various elements of places. Many respondents from northern communities had heard about particular programs in urban cities and migrated to these locales to access services. Once they became connected to a service system, some developed attachments and relationships with service providers. A number of respondents were appreciative of the services they received at a food bank, drop-in centre, shelter, or soup kitchen and spoke positively about them. However, Anglophones were more often connected with services and programs as compared to Francophone and Indigenous people who expressed difficulties in accessing services.

Bob (A–M–40) stated that service providers at food banks understood his situation, while Fabien (F–M–24) stated that “no one is on my side except for the drop-in centre.” Melody (I–W–40) described her attachment to a women’s service and said that it was a safe place for her. Similarly, Fran (I–W–25) asserted that she was strongly attached to the local women’s shelter, considered the service providers her “family” and said that she would probably “not be here right now if it wasn’t for them.”

Some participants narrated negative experiences implying lack of attachment to places. Shannon (I–W–41) explained her lack of attachment to a northeastern Ontario community: “My father passed away in Sault Ste. Marie [Ontario]; I left because there were too many memories of him there. So I moved here to [Sudbury].” She further elaborated upon her negative experiences in the Sudbury:
I can give an update about the bridge over Paris Street ... the city has blocked off access to the sheltered space underneath, so people can no longer sleep there. It's not a solution since homeless people have to find somewhere else to sleep.

In addition to her negative assessment of Sudbury, Shannon experienced a weakening of ties with her home community, a First Nation territory, due to the loss of friends and family members. She continued:

I’ve lost so many people in the last three years. The first year I lost about 18 people, then another 22 people and this year I have lost at least 12 people ... Because [of this] I can’t stay in a house too long.

Shannon’s losses reflect the ongoing effects of historical processes related to colonization, residential schools, racism and loss of cultural identity among many First Nations peoples in Canada.

Similar to the unitary conceptualization of home, popular conceptions and stereotypes of migration erroneously convey a one–way journey, a long–term or even permanent movement of residence from one place to another (Long 1988; McHugh and Ming 1996). However, some researchers argue that migration should not be viewed as a linear movement from origin to destination; rather it should be understood as a “circle of migration” characterising recurring cycles of journeys to and from different places (McHugh and Mings 1996, 546). The circle of migration may involve three phases—separation, experience and return.

The complexity of circulatory movements was particularly evident in the migratory patterns and diverse mobility histories revealed by homeless individuals. Giselle (F–W–17) said that she planned on “staying out of Montreal” but later explained her intentions regarding future actions involving a return to that city in her statement, “when I go back.” This implied that she planned, one day, to return to her former home town. In addition to Montreal, Quebec where her brother and mother were residing, Giselle showed some attachment to Toronto, Ontario, a place where the family united to celebrate Christmas. Aron (A–M–18) described his travels to meet family members across the province and his attachment to places where he thought his nomadic friends could be found. He sometimes went in search for them and they stayed together for a while before parting to go their separate ways. On the other hand Fran (I–W–25) received help and was able to build up some financial savings while staying in the women’s shelter when she moved to Sudbury, then later returned to her hometown where she felt that life was less hectic; but yet again, she later returned to Sudbury when she experienced intimate partner violence and required help from the women’s shelter.

Traditionally, migration is perceived as a de–territorializing process that destroys the meanings of places (Qian, Zhu, and Liu 2011). However, migration does not necessarily annihilate bonds with places. Migrants may negotiate meanings as they explore new places. This meaning–making process can be understood through the notions of identities, longing, and intentions which imply belonging and affiliation. In the current study, as homeless migrants explored new places, they actively engaged in the creation of personal meanings of places and derived personal identity from them. Often these identities were self–defined and rejected or negatively labelled as other by domiciled people. The homeless migrants in our study showed a strong identification with the subculture and feelings of friendship among people in similar situations. Bob (A–M–40) demonstrated a sense of identification with fellow homeless people by donating money to them. Fabien (F–M–24) similarly expressed a desire to become a volunteer and to develop a recreational centre for street people in the future.
Conclusions

The findings suggest that attachment to places among homeless migrants stems from personal experiences of events in a location or community or from longstanding roots in their home towns. These attachments grow from meanings, memories and identities associated with built forms or natural spaces containing physical, social and structural elements. Borrowing elements from structuration theory (Giddens 1990, 1991), it can be said that homeless individuals face existential uncertainties which may introduce doubts at a basic level of being. In addition to the loss of private dwellings and social ties, homeless individuals are often excluded from public places through laws pertaining to loitering, surveillance of inhabitants, regulations regarding access to certain public places (e.g., parks, malls) and the closure of shelters during the day time (Baker 1990–1991; Doherty et al. 2008). At times migration may occur by force as homeless people are sometimes given Greyhound bus tickets to move to other cities. This phenomenon has been described as “greyhound therapy” by researchers (see Hudson 2012, 117; Rahimian, Wolch, and Koegel 1992, 1318). These exclusionary practices further erode the sense of self–esteem and self–cohesion among homeless people who rely often on public locations to conduct day to day life functions. Despite such exclusionary practices, there is evidence that homeless people may develop bonds and attachments with places and street people (Berman et al. 2009). In our study, the bonds participants formed with places were central to their identity and sense of belonging. Hence along with race, class and gender, elements of place should also be considered in virtually any study, particularly those examining issues such as power, exclusion, and inequality within the society.¹

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REFERENCES


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Dr. Arshi Shaikh: Arshi Shaikh completed her Ph.D. in the Interdisciplinary Rural and Northern Health Ph.D. Program at Laurentian University, Ontario, Canada in 2011. Her research interests include women’s mental health issues (e.g., postpartum depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder), psychosocial determinants of mental health, and mental health program evaluation. Dr. Shaikh’s Ph.D. dissertation is a qualitative study about resilience among women who experience postpartum depression and their supporting others in the northern communities of Ontario, Canada. Dr. Shaikh’s research has also focused on migration and homelessness. Dr. Shaikh completed her Master of Social Work degree at Laurentian University in 2012.
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