**Conclusion Youth and Belonging: Agency, Place and Negotiation**

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## Abstract

This collection has focused on how scholars have engaged with belonging as a discursive and complex process, heavily influenced by history and surroundings. The contributors to the collection have concentrated on how belonging has been operationalised. Each author uses theories associated with belonging to interrogate empirical data of youth living and learning in diverse contexts. The concluding chapter identifies three main overlapping themes related to the study of belonging, youth and identity: belonging as an agentic identity practice, belonging and the importance of place and belonging as negotiated. Looking across the collection, the editors focus on synthesising some commonalities as well as highlighting different approaches currently shaping theoretical approaches to belonging.

## Introduction

In composing this collection, we have held that the very essence of belonging is connection, membership, attachment and a sense of security. Through the scholarship, we have seen that belonging is personal, relational and interwoven with a place, as well as infused with a sense of history and nostalgia. Belonging remains discursive, complex and continual in young people's lives. Furthermore, whether scholars approach belonging as a theory, a conceptual lens or an analytical framework, it is clear it has the capacity to open up exciting spaces to increase our understanding of youth and identity formation. In presenting empirical research on youth, place and belonging, the collection demonstrates the importance of belonging in

young people's lives – however, as theorists in this collection have noted, when theorising belonging and operationalising theories of belonging, scholars often have to negotiate inconsistencies and contradictions. In this concluding chapter we identify three main overlapping themes related to the study of belonging and identity (agency, place and negotiation) and we attempt to synthesise some commonalities and different approaches currently shaping theorisations of belonging.

**Belonging as an agentic identity practice**

Butler and Muir (2017), amongst others, emphasise the role of agency in theorising belonging and how it has the potential to 'prioritise the efforts made by young people to remain connected to people, places and issues that matter to them as they carve out a place in which they belong in the modern economy' (p. 320). We know this process of connection can often be fragmented, discursive and precarious (See Back et al 2015). Previously, drawing on Bourdieu (1984), Stahl and Habib 2017, pp. 269-270)have called attention to how theorising belonging can involve a critical eye on the social constructions of status, tied to 'conceptions of respect, authenticity and value' At the forefront of *Youth,Pplace and Theories of Belonging*, therefore, is attention to youth desiring to construct themselves as authentic individuals, and actively working toward this realisation.

For example, in Chapter 2 Baak et al. drawing on postcolonial and migration studies, show how, despite increased surveillance by law enforcement agencies and local government authorities, young people from South Sudanese heritage in Australia still actively pursue a connection to a specific place. Their continual efforts raise contestations over 'who *really* belongs *in* and *to* Darley', demonstrating how, in terms of the pursuit of authenticity and

legitimacy, ‘boundaries of belonging are not fixed, but discursively constructed, making belonging malleable’. Therefore, belonging has to be worked at, in continual negotiation with stakeholders, mentors and shifts toward gentrification. With a critical eye towards the nexus of masculinities, aspiration and belonging, Wignall in chapter 8, explores the ways in which Gambian men construct a sense of self and the ways in which they feel legitimate and perform their masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, in this active pursuit of authenticity, Wignall notes that their imaginaries and aspirations are often contradictory, ‘resulting in sometimes conflicting feelings of ambivalence and alienation’.

Chapter 5 reports on a very different study examining belonging as an agentic identity practice. Loewenthal and Broughton, who conducted research in New York, focus on young people’s travel imaginaries and highlight how global inequalities impact on young people’s mobilities (Cresswell 2006). They emphasise how heritage, ethnicity, and an interest in other places as well as future aspirations to travel inform how young people construct their identities in the present. Their approach to theorising belonging as agentic, highlights that belonging has epistemological and not merely ontological dimensions, and that it is possible to aspire to global citizenship through accepting, to varying degrees, one’s own difference within the world. In keeping with the role of pedagogy in exploring how young people come to belong, in Chapter 7 Cominos, Caldwell and Gloede explore the identity practices of Aboriginal young men, demonstrating alternative ways of being and belonging which avoid facile western–traditional binary classifications. Using positive discourse analysis and language mapping, Cominos et al concentrate on the on-field language in Australian rules football. Belonging for these young Aboriginal men is centred on a cohesive team, a shared experience of identity construction, evidenced in the ‘consistent use of specific interpersonal tokens of solidarity and leadership’. As these young men pursue what Cominos, et al call a ‘legitimated voice’, they

demonstrate how belonging in the classroom gives value, agency and prominence in an otherwise exclusive/non-Aboriginal space. They suggest that this pedagogy is both enabling and empowering for Aboriginal students, and enables them to participate in discourses which they were excluded from.

In another dimension of belonging and agency, we see how belonging is often formed in reference to the self, Others/Otherness, and pathologisation. Drawing on the work of Hall (1997) and based on their study of minority students attending a multicultural school in Oslo, Norway, Thomas, Seehawer and Fylkesnes contend that issues of identity and belonging are 'growing in importance in a country which until recently was ethnically homogenous, but has witnessed a steep rise in immigration'. Highlighting the contradictory nature of identity, they approach belonging as a pattern of identity construction negotiating the boundaries between mainstream identity and minority identity. The authors discuss how students from Muslim backgrounds actively attempt to transcend their Muslim identity; they 'appeared to shore up the confining and excluding boundaries drawn up by mainstream Norwegian society' where, specifically, 'Norwegian-ness' was to an extent 'jettisoned' in favour of a Muslim religious identity. Therefore, in this chapter we see how belonging is negotiated both by the self and conceptions of Otherness, particularly in relation to discourses of nationhood.

A separate form of 'otherness' and agency is addressed in Chapter 3, where Marchbank and Muller Myrdahl show how LGBTQ+ people in Canada, agentically come to belong through their physical presence and their queering of certain spaces, albeit temporarily. Drawing on Ahmed (2006) to explore how young people *intentionally* fit into their worlds, Marchbank and Muller Myrdahl illustrate the ways in which comfortability is significant and should not be discounted. Or, as Baak et al. argue (Chapter 2), conceptions of young people as 'Other' heavily

contribute to how they construct their identities, where ‘Questions of belonging centre on the question of who is “a stranger”, and who does not belong’, yet how these questions are answered remains quite context specific.

In exploring theories of belonging, we are compelled by how the scholars adopt different positions, from Bourdieu to Butler and Skeggs to Hall, to emphasise young people’s agency in their pursuit of a sense of legitimacy as the young people understand *how* to belong and *to what extent* they can belong (Stahl & Habib 2017; Habib 2017). In becoming agentic they are making a claim to a certain identity, tied to a desire for authenticity and legitimacy. Agency is also, at times, a response to pathologisation and Otherness, which highlights the continual tension between young people’s desire to act on a sense of agency and at times a severe sense of marginalisation.

**Belonging and the importance of place**

The study of belonging has always held place, space and ‘territories’ in high regard, an integral part of the theorisation (Habib 2017;; Davis, Gorashi & Smets 2018). Theories of place and space have their own complexities; for example, in this volume theorisation variously focuses on immediate context (Butler; Gordon), imagined places (Loewenthal & Broughton) and aspirational places (Sattar). Furthermore, in the collection, we see how places, in reference to belonging, are collectively realised and validated (Cominos, Caldwell & Gloede) as well as infused with a sense of history (McEwan; Miranda & Arancibia).

In Chapter 2 Baak et al. show how place is constructed through ‘government, private, public and individual interests’, where the current attempts to gentrify Darley (e.g. private sale of

government housing) undermine young people's sense of connection to place. However, in Baak et al's analysis they note: 'The young people's sense of belonging to Darley, where they spent most of their childhood, outweighs the changes to place which have contributed to them being unwanted'. The words of their participants show how attached they are to Darley, but it is largely the Darley of their childhood and, therefore, young people's voices are infused with a powerful sense of place-based nostalgia where belonging is tied to shared experiences. This is powerful work emphasising the multiple meanings of place. In Chapter 4, Gordon explores nostalgia and belonging in relation to the realities of the legacy of the Conflict in Northern Ireland, where she uses belonging to explore exclusionary processes that young people negotiate. Gordon writes: 'Children and young people describe the expectations placed upon them by adults regarding the future and stability of the "new" Northern Ireland, which they feel they were not a part of forming'. Cast as 'the lost generation' or 'out of control', Gordon explains that young people feel like they inherited a place with an overbearing history and describes what this means for their identity construction. It is a place which they often do not feel connected to like previous generations.

Focusing on the importance of place, Wignall's ethnographic research highlights how a sense of belonging is collectively formed in a YMCA in The Gambia, an organisation which focuses 'on producing productive young men able to act as capable citizens and to enact positive, non-disruptive modes of masculinity'. The institution, as a multi-national place, is central to identity construction, actively 'responsibilising' young men through 'a series of tests, challenges and obligations, with the ultimate prize being integration into the YMCA system'. Throughout the chapter Wignall emphasises attachment to place, but this is not always straightforward where the 'complex imaginaries and aspirations these spaces help to generate' can often result in 'conflicting feelings of ambivalence and alienation'. A similar process of masculinity

management, place and belonging is present in Sattar's study of middle-class men living in an all-male hostel in Lahore, Pakistan. As these young men come to the hostel for the purpose of studying to take competitive bureaucrat exams, he shows how, in terms of belonging, they are embedded in what Lave and Wenger (1991) term communities of practice which, in turn, become essential forms of social capital necessary to secure their upper-middle-class status. Both chapters highlight the importance of young men belonging to an institution, whether formal or informal, and how such experiences within them contribute to the formation of their masculine identity. Furthermore, the YMCA and the hostel are sites of aspiration maintenance, where, as young people come to belong and engage in learning practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991), legitimately realising their aspirations becomes increasingly possible.

McEwan, in Chapter 9, focuses on the importance of place in contributing to the structure of identity practices and a sense of belonging in a large modern housing development situated in Ingleby, in the North East of England. Following the notion that 'people beget place as place begets people' and discourses of meritocracy, McEwan problematises her participants' suggestions that people 'make it' to Ingleby only if they are deserving. There are significant overlaps with other chapters here in terms of how people avoid being pathologised as they work to constitute themselves as valuable individuals. Belonging for McEwan – similar to the approaches in the scholarship by Wyn, Cuervo and Cook, Marchbank and Muller Myrdahl, and Sattar – is not only about geographical location; it is about 'the associated struggles for authenticity or acceptance' where individuals feel compelled to access particular places in their pursuit of value and specific localised forms of capital develop

**Belonging as negotiated**

In light of the research presented in this collection, it may be most appropriate to conceive of belonging as negotiated. As young people navigate certain discourses, they moderate and adjust their identity accordingly. In research on refugees and migrants, belonging has been theorised as 'contested', and has been explored as 'space, practice and as biography', often 'imagined, enacted, constrained, negotiated and contested' (Davis, Gorashi & Smets 2018, p. 4). Yuval-Davis (2006) argues there may be a multiplicity of belongings where 'people can "belong" in many different ways and to many different objects of attachments' (p. 199). Regardless of the theoretical approach, belonging always seems to be in tension. In Chapter 6, Miranda and Arancibia present research on women in Argentina, from the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, demonstrating how places are infused with history and subject to nostalgia. They develop the conceptual lens of the 'grammar of youth' to explore how women from different social backgrounds have come to belong to varying extents. The grammar of youth, which allows for exploration of multiple biographies, emphasises the relationship between the activities and approaches that contemporary societies offer to young people as well as 'the normative frameworks that support expectations of compliance' which are 'built into a value and hierarchical system that tends to stigmatise young people'. Such an approach, we feel, highlights the ways in which belonging is negotiated, facilitating 'the incorporation of generational identity, roots and affectivity as central notions for the analysis of youth transition'. Similar to Miranda and Arancibia, McEwan, in exploring the relationship between social stratification, relationships and belonging, draws our attention to how a sense of value is moderated in reference to social class status (see Skeggs, 1997). According to McEwan, the 'production, and justification, of social stratification takes effort and is negotiated through the active practice, recognisable to others, of (dis)taste', which contributes to how people either stay in one social space or become socially mobile.

Similarly, Butler's exploration of Australia's transforming rural communities emphasises how place informs young people's 'intercultural relationships within such rural places of social change', which can often be an unpleasant picture of racism and prejudice. Capitalising on frameworks associated with multiculturalism (see Wise and Velayutham 2009), Butler documents how students 'constantly negotiate their coexistence through routinised encounters with Others' which occur in various places in the community. This negotiation is similar to Thomas, et al's research in Norway which questions the empowerment of Muslim minorities and the extent to which inclusivity is possible. As the world 'is constantly changing', thus 'our sense of home and belonging is constantly readapting and readjusting to the new realities' (Marcu 2014, p. 327). However, in contrast to research on inclusion in communities and schools, Cominos, et al focus on the collectively realised identity of one marginalised ethnic group. Through language mapping, they demonstrate in Chapter 7 how young people 'describe and deconstruct discourses which are typically invisible or impenetrable to certain social groups', which allows for an exploration of feelings, judgements of behaviour and how young people evaluate things. Therefore, in Cominos, et al's research and analysis, belonging is negotiated as part of a collective solidarity tied to a pedagogic approach, and not in individualised ways or in reference to the Other.

Highlighting another dimension of belonging as negotiated, many of the scholars in this book, in their investigation of youth identities and identity practices, have drawn our attention to the temporality of belonging (Marcu 2014). While belonging may be institutionally validated and realised collectively, the stability and durability of belonging is, of course, difficult to document. In Chapter 1, Wyn, et al, drawing on their longitudinal research, demonstrate how belonging for young people is constructed in reference to everyday experiences that entrench them in their milieu, 'the practices of "dealing with" proximity to others and the sense of ease

and familiarity with physical surroundings', which contribute significantly to how they come to belong. In focusing on the temporal nature of belonging, Wyn, et al. emphasise the importance of nostalgia, which, in their view, 'enables people to hold on to the ephemeral human and non-human elements that are associated with belonging'. Nostalgia, and the feeling of loss, remains highly contradictory, closely tied to memories of childhood, as their participants often felt nostalgia 'for places that they had not actually left'. The notion of temporality and nostalgia is also relevant to how Thomas, et al, Gordon, and McEwan study belonging, as it contributes to how young people construct their identities, albeit in very diverse ways.

**Conclusion**

In *Youth, Place and Theories of Belonging*, we have shown that the concept is far from straightforward. Belonging often appears to be infused with individuals' relational and collective histories, constructed through the social milieu youth experience daily. The three themes we have highlighted (agency, place and negotiation) are not mutually exclusive, but rather each chapter speaks to them in some way. In conclusion, building on 'theories of belonging', the scholars operationalise their own interpretations in reference to their research on youth in diverse contexts. While youth and belonging has become an important area of study, it is still exploratory and subject to experimentation. Rather than subscribing to one singular theory of belonging, we see an interdisciplinary approach, oftentimes blending different theoretical frameworks (structural, performative, post-colonial, pedagogical, as imagined places, or as communities of practice) . Therefore, in using theory to understand the relationship between identity, power, legitimacy and place, we see how using theories of belonging can enhance our understanding of experiences of youth. In examining the

commonalities and differences in the authors' approaches to studying belonging, we hope this edited collection makes a contribution to an emerging field of studies of belonging in youth studies.

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