**Title**: Place and identity: meanings of place among Somali immigrants in a Finnish neighborhood

**Abstract**

Immigration is closely connected to the notion of place. Social psychology, however, has shown little interest in studying the meanings attributed to places by immigrants, or the role of place for their identities. These issues are at the core of this study which examined, based on qualitative interview data, the meanings Somali immigrants living in Finland give when they talk about different places, as well as how they differentiate between places and use them as sources of social identity. Social identity theory and self-categorization theory, together with literature on place-person relationships from environmental psychology, formed the theoretical framework of the study.

The research material was generated through semi-structured interviews among a diverse sample of nine Somali immigrants. The participants were aged 13 to 39 years and lived in the suburb of Vuosaari in Helsinki. Theory-bound qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the content of their talk about places.

Five main meaning themes emerged in the participants’ talk about their place of residence and other places in their lives. The aspects of place that were most meaningful to the participants were social networks, the multicultural nature of a place, self-efficacy, safety and familiarity. The five themes were often closely connected to each other and they were all primarily related to the social—not physical—aspects of the environment. In particular, the presence of co-ethnics, i.e. the Somaliness of the place, was presented as a central aspect of place and it was connected to all of the five meaning themes.

In exploring how the participants differentiated between places, three kinds of place categorizations were identified: Vuosaari (vs. other places), within Vuosaari categorizations, and Helsinki (vs. other places). All of the categorizations were identity-relevant, i.e. functioned as sources of social identity, and the participants identified simultaneously with multiple places at different levels of environmental scale. Combining an analysis of place meanings with a more traditional analysis of social identity processes also revealed close connections between ethnic identity and place identity. Emphasizing the multicultural and Somali nature of Vuosaari as a central aspect of the place meant that identification with Vuosaari implied identification with an inherently Somali place. In addition, the fact that the participants identified themselves first as Somalis, and only then as inhabitants of Vuosaari, showed that for them ethnic identity was more significant than place identity.

The conclusion is that we can and should study places as sources of social identity in their own right, but that such research needs to take into account both place meanings and the individuals’ other social identities. The study concludes with several practical and policy implications regarding the five meaning themes, as well as a discussion of the potential of place identity in enhancing the integration of immigrants in the host society.

**Keywords**: social identity, place identity, place meaning, Somali immigrants, neighborhood, Finland

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**Additional Information**

- **Where deposited**: Muita tietoja-Övriga uppgifter