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Adult attachment theory and attachment to place: Exploring relationships
between people and places.

Thesis submitted by

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Statement on the contribution of others

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of my supervisor Dr Peter Raggatt during the conceptual stages of the study, the collection, analysis and interpretation of data and editorial advice. He has also contributed to research publications which have come from this thesis.

I acknowledge the advice of Dr Jenny Promnitz during the early conceptual stages of the study and for her editorial advice during the early stages of the thesis.

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Declaration on Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the National Statement on Ethics Conduct in research Involving Humans (1999), the Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice (1997), the James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics, Standard Practices and Guidelines (2001), and the James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval numbers H1526 and H1832).

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Abstract

First proposed by Bowlby in 1969, attachment theory was developed to conceptualise the universal human need to form close affectional bonds. According to Bowlby, infant attachment behaviour is regulated by an innate behavioural system, designed through natural selection to promote safety and survival. This is achieved by seeking and maintaining proximity to a caregiver. When attachment needs are fulfilled the infant is able to explore the environment, secure with the knowledge of the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). In 1987, Hazen and Shaver demonstrated the ability of the theory to predict variations in the way that adults experience romantic love. Their study triggered a surge in research ultimately designed to measure the complexity and continuity of the attachment process across the life span.

Over the past three decades there has also been emerging interest in relation to the broad topic of *place attachment*. Research has indicated that the concept incorporates: strong emotional bonds to place; memories and other cognitive interpretations that provide meaning to the experience of place; and anxiety or concern associated with separation or removal from a particular place (Low & Altman, 1992). Although scientific investigation of interpersonal attachment theory and its environmental analogue, attachment to place, were being conducted simultaneously, researchers tended to overlook the prospect of a conjoint working model or the extension of the attachment behavioural system to examine core environmental relationships.

The primary goal of this thesis was to apply an interpersonal attachment model to place attachment. Four broad research questions were addressed,

the first of which concerned links between place and interpersonal attachment. The second was to identify attachment style differences in the experience of childhood places and the current home. The third research question examined whether the bonds that we form with place can in fact be classified as attachment bonds, with characteristics similar to those that we form with people. The final research question focused on the composition and structure of the network of places in which people live, and how they relate to those places. The research was conducted across two studies, using a questionnaire battery which contained a combination of new and published, qualitative and quantitative measures.

The first study, using a sample of 99 undergraduate students (age 17-55), investigated the relationship between interpersonal and place attachment and examined attachment style differences in the experience of place using favourite childhood places, the present home, and personal possessions as the primary objects of attachment. The results provided evidence of the predicted associations between interpersonal and place attachment styles, but failed to support an association between place and possession attachment. The study also illustrated both place and interpersonal attachment style differences in the experience of childhood places and current homes. Secure place and interpersonal attachment were associated with time spent with others and higher levels of positive affect, whereas insecure place and interpersonal attachment were associated with higher levels of negative affect, and the recall of negative memories of childhood places.

The second study, with a sample of 105 adults (age 18-79), examined the structure of the network of places in which people live and how they relate

to those places and the network of people that they interact with. It also investigated place and interpersonal attachment, and personality style differences in the composition of those attachment networks and examined whether or not relationships with place can be classified as 'attachment bonds'.

The results provided evidence of the predicted associations between interpersonal and place attachment styles, but failed to support an association with the Big Five personality traits. Relationships with several types of place were confirmed as attachment bonds based on the use of these places for a range of attachment functions (e.g. using the place as a safe haven and secure base; evidence of hypothetical sense of loss). Attachment style differences in the interaction between people and the places listed in their attachment network were also illustrated. Those who were securely attached to place valourised their current home whereas those who were insecurely attached valourised previous homes, leisure environments and holiday destinations.

Overall the current research suggests empirical support for the proposed theoretical links between interpersonal and place attachment. It also supports the proposition that our relationships with place are attachment bonds with similar characteristics to those identified for interpersonal attachment. Theoretical implications as well as future directions for research are outlined in relation to the findings.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades within the discipline of psychology, the concept of 'attachment' has been most fully explored in relation to infant behaviour. First proposed by Bowlby in 1969, attachment theory was developed to conceptualise the universal human need to form close affectional bonds. According to Bowlby, infant attachment behaviour is regulated by an innate motivational system known as the attachment behavioural system, and is designed through natural selection to promote safety and survival (Bowlby, 1969).

The theory suggests that children seek proximity to attachment figures in order to find both security and protection. In 1978, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall tested the theory by systematically observing the primary caregiver's response to an infant's signals, during the first year of life. The research suggested a link between this interactive process and the infants' development of one of three attachment styles: secure; avoidant; and anxious ambivalent.

In 1987, a study conducted by Hazen and Shaver suggested that although attachment theory was postulated with infants in mind, the theory offered a valuable perspective on adult romantic love. The study introduced a three category measure of adult attachment as an adult analog of Mary Ainsworth's classification of infants. The results of the study indicated that the relative prevalence of adult attachment styles mirrored that of infancy, and that adults categorised according to the three types (secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent) differed predictably in the way that they experienced romantic love. This study triggered a surge in research ultimately designed to

measure the complexity and continuity of the attachment process across the life span.

Over the past three decades there has also been some emerging interest in relation to the broad topic of *place attachment*. Scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have examined the concept using a number of philosophical and theoretical perspectives, in a range of environments including cities, public meeting places and wilderness areas (Low & Altman, 1992; Giuliani & Feldman, 1993; Milligan, 1998). Research has indicated that the concept incorporates: strong emotional bonds to place; memories and other cognitive interpretations that provide meaning to the experience of place; and a sense of anxiety associated with potential removal from a particular place (Low & Altman, 1992). Notably the home environment and our personal possessions have been the focus of a number of studies in relation to the concept of *place attachment*.

Although scientific investigation of interpersonal attachment theory and its environmental analogue, attachment to place, were being conducted simultaneously, researchers tended to overlook the prospect of a conjoint working model or the extension of the attachment behavioural system to examine core environmental relationships.

In 2003, however Giuliani reviewed the literature surrounding affective bonds to the places in which people are born, live and act, and the people that share those spaces. Giuliani acknowledges that Bowlby (1973) considered the attachment relationship with the caregiver to be part of a much greater set of systems that impact upon the maintenance of a stable relationship with the familiar environment. Although the article compared the developments in research across both interpersonal and environmental attachment it stopped

short of implying a correlation between an individual's attachment patterns and the type of bond formed with place. The review revealed both similarities and differences in the research and provided a good foundation for the further exploration of the links between the two.

In 2004, Kleine and Baker published an integrative review of the literature surrounding our attachments to material possessions which suggested links between the research conducted on place attachment, possession attachment, and 'experience attachment' defined as *"a personal, psychological bond to situations that deliver sought after symbolic benefit"* (p.23).

Using what they refer to as characteristics that portray attachment the article set about defining commonalities in the three research areas: attachments form with specific people, objects and places; objects of attachment must be psychologically appropriated; there must be a transactional history between the object of attachment and the person; objects of attachments become decommodified and singularised; attachments can be defined according to strength; attachments are multi faceted, and emotionally complex; attachments evolve over time as the meaning of self changes, and are a form of self extension(Klein & Baker, 2004).

Noteworthy were the similarities that were apparent between these characteristics and the research conducted in relation to interpersonal attachments, hence these characteristics will be explored in the literature review that follows. Further evidence of the possibility of place attachment as a parallel system to interpersonal attachment was found in the exploratory research conducted by Morgan (2010). This research made valuable links between the childhood formation and development of attachments to place and interpersonal

attachment relationships.

The current research, premised upon these foundations, has been designed to investigate the dynamic relationship between people, places and possessions, and the possibility of place attachment as a parallel system to interpersonal attachment. The research was conducted across two studies, the first of which examined interpersonal and place attachment based interactions with the home and possessions. The second study further investigated those interactions, examining the composition and structure of the network of places in which people live and how they relate to those places. It also investigated whether the bonds that we form with place can be classified as attachment bonds with similar characteristics to those identified for interpersonal attachment, and examined the influence of personality traits on place attachment.

Organisation of the thesis

Chapter one will begin with a review of the place attachment literature with particular attention given to the home environment and possessions, highlighting the attachment characteristics as specified by Kleine and Baker (2004) in relation to place and possession attachment. Chapter two will introduce the concept and evolution of interpersonal attachment. Commencing with an overview of the inception of the theory it will briefly trace the major trajectories of research conducted to date. Chapter 3 will primarily tie the two major research areas together to refine and reinforce the links that are evident. The final part of this chapter will isolate the research aims and objectives of the current study.

Chapter 4 details the rationale and methods for the first study conducted

while chapter 5 reports the results and discussion. Chapter 6 details the rationale and methods for the second study and chapter 7 reports the results and discussion. The final chapter (chapter 8) presents an overview and concluding discussion of the results of the research conducted and includes suggestions for further research.