Taylor, Stephanie

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**Original Citation**

Taylor, Stephanie (2005) Identity Trouble and Place ofResidence in Women's Life Narratives. In: Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 97-105.

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# 10 Identity Trouble and Place of Residence in Women's Life Narratives

STEPHANIE TAYLOR

Work in narrative and discursive psychology offers a theoretical and analytic approach to the meaning of place for identity in contemporary society. The conventional 'born and bred' or nativeness connection between place and residence based on long-term personal and family connection can be understood as a canonical narrative (Bruner, 1987) and a resource for speakers in their identity work in relation to place. Wetherell (1998) and others have suggested that speakers engage actively in such identity work, for example, by taking up subject positions, but they are also constrained, for example, by the resources and positions made available by larger discourses. This constraint can appear as 'trouble', when an identity is potentially challengeable as implausible or inconsistent. In a society characterised by increased mobility and instability of residence, such trouble can occur in conventional positioning in relation to place. Analysis of interview data from women speakers reveals an alternative positioning in relation to a chosen place of residence. The emphasis on choice and opportunity in their talk is consistent with the reflexive project to construct an individual identity of self and achievement associated with a contemporary or neo-liberal subject (Rose, 1996; Walkerdine, 2003). However the analysis suggests that this alternative identity work is also constrained, and that trouble occurs in relation to a gendered identity.

*Extract i*

> P1: Well my ex-partner was born and bred in Leytonstone and he doesn't want to move away from Leytonstone he's very much you know

*Extract ii*

> P1: I mean this is something else I think about I don't know if the concept of home for me exists at the moment because I've (.) You know cos I've had these two big moves really you know

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*Extract iii*

> P3: I think having lived in London (.) probably find living in a small village
> would actually be (laughter) a bit claustrophobic Um I think bit restrictive I
> think in terms of what you can do and how where you places you can <u>get</u> to

We tend to associate distinctive identities with particular places, for example, when we generalize about 'Londoners' or 'Northerners', or the people 'typical' of a place defined nationally, or in terms of urbanisation (the inner city, the suburbs) or landscape. Yet we also assume that in contemporary Western societies the links between people and places are weaker than in the past. Relatively few people stay where their parents and grandparents grew up, or live their lives inside a stable, distinct society or community. Local cultures and traditions may persist but their influence is diluted by the impact of mass media and commerce. Families are likely to be divided by moves elsewhere and also perhaps by divorce and new family structures (Jamieson, 1998). These changes suggest that the people who live in a particular place do not necessarily share family ties, history, culture or experience. What, then, can be the basis of a contemporary claim to an identity related to place?

Some theorists have suggested that the very nature of identity has also changed in contemporary society (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Rose, 1996; Walkerdine, 2003). They propose that 'who I am' is defined in more individual terms and there is an onus on people to construct and actively present such an identity. One way to present ourselves as autonomous and successful is through the narratives of our lives as 'the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realisation' (Rose, 1999 quoted by Walkerdine, 2003, p.240). Walkerdine discusses women who reject a working class identity for a self-description in terms of career success and upward mobility, thus replacing a social identity which is 'given' with a chosen identity of individual effort and achievement. A possible parallel would be the change from an identity conferred by being 'born and bred' in a particular place, to a connection with a place claimed through choice, especially if that chosen place itself provides further opportunities for self-realisation.

Other discursive and narrative theorists are less concerned with the special nature of contemporary identities but similarly emphasise speakers' work to construct and claim identities. Discursive psychologists (eg. Edley, 2001; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) have analysed the discursive resources from which we construct identities, that is, the shared meanings and established logics found in our talk, including in words and images, and also the positionings (Davies and Harré, 1990) these make available. Narrative theorists (eg. Bruner, 1986; Bruner, 1991; Mishler, 1999) discuss narratives as both resources and 'identity performances' (Mishler, 1999, p.19). These approaches assume that

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identity construction is not once-for-all but an ongoing project, for example, to link past and present identities through narrative. A story of a remembered place can function to position a speaker in relation to it, for example, as the kind of person who did not belong there (Taylor, 2001). This kind of memory is a resource for identity work, including in the context of a research interview.

All places, named and unnamed, are rich with meanings and a source of discursive resources. By positioning myself as someone <u>of</u> a place, or alternatively as an outsider, I can selectively take up meanings in my own identity work. The notion of residence as a relationship to place also invokes a recognizable born-and-bred or 'nativeness' narrative in which birth, family connection and long-term residence constitute a claim to belonging. This narrative is itself a resource, understandable as a 'canonical narrative' (Bruner, 1987, p.15). It offers a sequence of being born somewhere, growing up, having children who then grow up there, and so on. It can be varied or challenged. The narrative confers an apparent logic or rightness on certain ideas and connections: for example, that the people of a place have something in common, and that later-comers or migrants are different and do not fit in.

Some narrative theorists analyse the personal, even unconscious meanings which places hold (eg. Hollway and Jefferson, 2001). However my interest is in the kind of social meanings I have described and their implications for speakers' identity work. This focus derives from an understanding of identity as in part socially determined or conferred and in part chosen by an active speaker. Davies and Harré (1990) suggest that subject positions are constituted through discourses, but people can make choices about taking up positions. Similarly, Wetherell (1998) suggests that the discourses of the larger society make available multiple subject positions which speakers negotiate. Both sources emphasise the constraints on speakers. Wetherell is interested in the turn-by-turn identity work which is the focus of conversation analysis. Davies and Harré discuss the unfolding conversation, in which people are also positioned by others, and also 'the storylines which are embedded in fragments of the participants' autobiographies' (p.48). This is not to say that we construct a 'linear non-contradictory autobiography' (p.49) through our talk but that nonetheless we are already positioned by our previous histories and talk. In short, we make our own identities but within constraints.

How do these constraints operate? Wetherell and Edley propose the concept of 'trouble' in identity work (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1998). An identity is troubled if it can potentially be challenged as inconsistent or implausible. The speaker is likely to anticipate this challenge by doing some kind of repair work. Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein suggest:

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> Our identities must resonate with our community's understandings of who and what individuals might possibly be, or else we have some explaining to do.
>
> (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, p.9)


### Researching Place and Identity

I collected my interview data for a project to investigate the significance of place for identity. The speakers were women who responded to an invitation to talk about current and former places of residence, including their 'experiences, ideas and feelings'. The interview questions were phrased to allow them to interpret 'place' as they wished.

The lives of the project's participants, as they described them, echoed the mobility and instability of residence in contemporary society. Of the 19 women interviewed, only two still lived in or near the place where they had been born and grown up, and both of them had left, then returned. Nine had lived in more than one country for extended periods (not including moves between England, Scotland and Wales) and two still lived away from their country of birth. Of course these numbers, while interesting, are too small to be significant or representative. It is also likely that some women participated because their life circumstances prompted a special interest in place and identity, making it something to 'think about', as speaker P1 says in Extract ii (see Taylor, 2001).

In analysing the body of interview data, I looked first for patterns across interviews as indicative of a shared discursive resource, such as an interpretative repertoire (Taylor, 2003), a discourse or a canonical narrative. I then examined the implications of this resource for the identity work of particular speakers.

The short extracts above illustrate two patterns. The first is the born-and-bred narrative of residence already described. In Extract I, speaker P1 positions someone else in terms of this narrative and its logic, so that his reluctance to leave the place where he was 'born and bred' is presented as understandable ('you know'). In Extract ii she employs the same resource to position herself differently: her life narrative has included 'two big moves' so as a consequence she does not have a connection to a place which makes it 'home'.

The second pattern is the description of places in terms of the opportunities they make available and what you can do there, as in Extract iii. This could be seen as part of a discourse of consumption (Skeggs, 2004). It offers a positioning as someone who values opportunities and makes choices. This is similar to the identity which Rose (1996) describes as 'the choosing self' (p.17). One point of interest is how far it can be plausibly sustained. For a speaker like P1, can a relationship to place based on individual choice and the maximising of opportunities do equivalent identity work to the relationship

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given by the born-and-bred narrative of residence, or will it give rise to trouble?

Wetherell and Edley suggest that trouble is often visible through a speaker's repair work in successive turns of conversation. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) and Rose and Walkerdine (2003) place a greater emphasis on speaker's reflexive identity work and narrative construction across different occasions of talk. This suggests that trouble may similarly endure across separate occasions and may be referred to and reflected upon by a speaker. In my analysis, I examine speakers' own references to problems in claiming a relationship with a particular place.

## Trouble Around Belonging

The extracts below are from a single interview. The speaker, P1, spent her childhood in a city in the North of England (indicated as [city]). When she was 12, she emigrated to New Zealand with her birth family of parents and siblings. Four years before the interview, when she was 36, she moved to London. At the time of the interview she had been living for approximately two years in a flat she had bought in a London neighbourhood.

*Extract iv[1]*

　　P1: (.) I suppose I wouldn't call myself <u>a New Zealander</u> but I say I've lived there for a long time just because it's mainly because of the accent really I mean really I feel I should have (.) a New Zealand accent because you know and everyone always says that they're surprised that I haven't got a New Zealand accent which I am as well but um (.) I can't help it sort of thing (laughter) (.) You know (.) well I mean when I lived in New Zealand the whole every single day someone would say (.) you know when did you arrive sort of thing and I feel I've been here for twenty-odd years so (laughter)

*Extract v*

　　P1: I still feel a real I love going up to [city] yeah I like going up there (.) um cos I've got my friend up there Although I've got family links up there cos my mum and dad haven't been in touch (…) so I don't really feel like I wanna (.) you know like that I could just turn up and get in touch And also that in those sort of you know working-class places once you <u>leave</u> you sort of it's very

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[1]　The following symbols are used in the transcription:
　　(.) indicates a short pause
　　<u>underlining</u> indicates emphasis
　　(laughter) indicates laughter
　　[…] indicates a section of transcript omitted

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hard to come back again you know they don't want to know yeah it's really interesting but um (.)

These extracts show trouble in the speaker's identity work around two former places of residence. She defines one, New Zealand, in national terms, and the other, in England, by the name of the city (here indicated as [city]). In New Zealand, her long-term residence ('twenty-odd years') might plausibly entitle her to position herself as someone <u>of</u> the place, but she was constantly positioned by others ('every single day') as not belonging because of her accent. Her relationship to [city] derives from her feelings for the place ('I love going'), her family links, and, detailed elsewhere, her childhood experience. However, this relationship is challenged by other people who position her as not belonging because of the move away: 'once you <u>leave</u> you sort of it's very hard to come back again you know they don't want to know'.

Part of the trouble is because P1 does not have the continuity of residence associated with the born-and-bred narrative. A further problem is that she does not have the accent associated with a New Zealand identity. Finally, as she discusses elsewhere, she does not position herself as having the working class identity attached to [city].

How can this kind of trouble around place and identity be repaired or avoided? Wetherell and Edley (1998) focus on the repair which occurs in the immediate situation of talk. Does this mean that trouble can be 'talked away'? P1 could plausibly have responded when someone commented on her accent by explaining that she was not a visitor, she had lived in New Zealand for a long time. Part of the conventional distinction between an aspect of identity which is 'marked' or problematised and one which is taken for granted is precisely that the former may require this kind of tedious re-explanation. Another solution would be to accept a positioning as a resident who is different or does not belong. This can itself do identity work, by contrast with the established identity of the people of the place.

Another possibility, parallelling the choosing self or aspirational agentic identities discussed by Rose and Walkerdine (2003), might be for a speaker to claim, instead of the social identity given by the born-and-bred narrative, a more individual positioning in relation to place. For example, some speakers defined place of residence very narrowly in order to exclude or reject the wider social meanings of a place, discussing 'where I live' in terms of a house and garden, or the interior of a flat. As the following extract shows, this kind of positioning did identity work for P1 in two ways. First, a point she repeated throughout the interview, owning a house was important to her as part of her aspiration to move away from both her working class background and the disruption to her upbringing created by the family's migration. Second, this narrow definition enabled her to ignore the negative reputation of the part of London she lived in, indicated here as [neighbourhood].

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*Extract vi*

> P1: To me <u>houses</u> are quite important I've got this thing about a nice house you see not a palace not a mansion I've got a flat here but (.) you know um (.) because we I never felt we had a <u>home</u> of our own like when I was growing up you know that seems to take more precedence over (.) You know I keep going on about the flat in [neighbourhood] [neighbourhood] itself is not a fantastic place but I love my flat there do you know what I mean so (.) […] Like I say I I don't seem to be able to differentiate place from house (.)

Speaker P1 therefore attempts to avoid the trouble in her identity work around other places by defining her current place of residence narrowly, in terms of the flat she has bought. This is an individual and potentially fragile identification, requiring suitable finances and possibly freedom from dependents. For many women it would not be possible. It can also be seen as a denial of the social identity of the place defined less narrowly, for example, as [neighbourhood]. For P1, there was a conflict between her liking for her flat and the general lack of safety of [neighbourhood]. A woman had recently been mugged in the street directly outside her flat.

*Extract vii*

> P1: when I bought my flat I really really loved it (.) And yeah (.) I suppose this mugging a few days ago has really sort of up- upset me a little bit you know

This mugging threatened her identification with her current place of residence, however defined. If she could not live there safely, because she was positioned by (unknown) others as a potential target for attack, then her continuing positioning of herself as resident was precarious. It is likely that this was a particular issue for her as a woman (cf. Chasteen, 1994). In other words, there is trouble around reconciling an identity as a resident of this place with an identity as a woman living alone.


**Conclusion**

Discursive and narrative theories offer an understanding of the importance of place of residence for identities in contemporary societies in which many people no longer live where they were 'born and bred'. I have taken from Wetherell (1998), Davies and Harré (1990) and others, the notion of identity as partly socially determined and partly claimed and constructed by an individual. Analysing interview data, I have looked at women speakers' identity work around place.

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Rose (1999) and Walkerdine (2003) propose that there is an onus on the contemporary individual to construct an identity for herself <u>as</u> a self-actualising individual who makes choices and realises herself by using available opportunities. This is not to say, of course, that the social constraints on identity work disappear. The interview data illustrates speaker P1's 'trouble' (Wetherell, 1998) around an identity of belonging in either her birthplace or her place of long-term residence. This trouble derives from an established meaning of the place-residence relationship which I refer to as the born-and-bred or nativeness narrative. Her decision to define her place of residence more narrowly, in terms of her flat, can be seen as an attempt to avoid this trouble and also perhaps to take up the 'choosing self' identity described by Rose (1996). However, she also encounters trouble in this different identity work. There is a high level of street crime in the area where she can afford her flat and as a single woman she may be particularly vulnerable to attack. The ways she is positioned by others constrain her choice to position herself as belonging there; her identity as resident is potentially precarious.

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