

# Local Identity as the Concept of Agency

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## Abstract

In today's globalized society, regional disparities are on the rise. Therefore, community revitalization has become an important theme in modern society. But what impels us towards community revitalization? We supposedly feel a connection to the town we live in and the city we visit, in that we seem to seek some kind of identity. The starting point of our discussion in this paper is the issue of what kind of meaning the self as the subject associates with this kind of a place. Further, we organize the concept of "local identity" and discuss the importance of "self-esteem" and "self-efficacy" among other things. In addition, the concept of "agency" is used to position the subject in the discussion. In activities such as community revitalization, the relationship between self and place becomes significant depending on the "agency".

**Keywords:** Community, Placeness, Local identity, Agency

## 1. Introduction

Community revitalization is an important topic in the transdisciplinary field of tourism studies in Japan that includes sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, economics, and business administration. Community revitalization consists of a series of activities in which rural areas faced with problems such as population outflow, economic decline, declining birthrates and aging population, are mainly trying to attract industries, create jobs, and promote tourism. In other words, in recent years in Japan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has been working on policies aimed at creating a "*teiju jinkou*" (population of inhabitants: residents of the region), "*koryu jinkou*" (a non-resident population: tourists and visitors), as well as "*kankei jinkou*" (populations that are neither residents nor tourists who are involved, and retain various interests, in the region: regional experience seekers)<sup>1</sup>. One of the motivations that support such activities is that we feel some kind of a connection to a particular place, such as the place where we live, where we come from, or the place we visit. It is in our efforts to protect places that have such connections that the importance of community revitalization emerges for us. So how do we connect to a specific place through the activity of community revitalization, and how do we try to engage with the regional area or place?

## 2. Placeness and the material self

As a concept that connects a given space to one's self, we have Relph's (1976) "placeness." Here, place is an existential space, and depending on the memories and the history of the people there, it is given the meaning it has for the people there. The character of such a place is referred to as its "placeness." On the other hand, when a place becomes homogenized and undifferentiated through modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and tourism, a loss of place, in other words "placelessness," occurs.

The concepts of "placeness" and "placelessness," presented by Relph, can be viewed as a problem in terms of the relationship between space and self, when the assumption is that the self is placed in a given space. The feeling of "placeness" assumes that the self has a direct connection with that space. Therefore, the self in this case is a self that enables direct experience.

James (1890) categorizes the "I" as "the pure ego" and "the empirical self", and assumes the following three

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items for “the empirical self”: “the material self,” such as body, clothing, and family, “the social self,” such as status and honor, “the spiritual self,” such as qualities and beliefs. It is considered that when these three kinds of self are established the “I” can be “I”. Here, if one attributes the meaning of “placeness” to place as existential space, it becomes important to place these three kinds of self, especially the material self (in other words the body), in this space. To begin with, in human development, self-consciousness first sprouted in the physical self that is the self as body (Kajita, 1988). For example, in a study of the Body-Theory including Merleau-Ponty, Alerby, Hagström, & Westman says the following.

“As humans, we access the world through our bodies and the knowledge we develop is always embodied. The body and the world are two aspects of a reversibility,” (Alerby et al., 2014)

In other words, to place the self in a given place refers to seeing self-consciousness take birth in that place while we feel a sense of “placeness” in that place. In this way, the concept of local/regional identity has been used in the discussion of the formation of the self through a connection with a particular place.

### **3. Definition of the identity concerned with a regional place**

The concept of local/regional identity mentioned above has been widely used in tourism studies as one of the motivations for community revitalization, but in Japan this concept has actually been used with at least four different meanings.

The first is place identity. In environmental psychology, Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff (1983) define the concept of place identity in the following way: “a substructure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognition about the physical world in which the individual lives.” Here it is pointed out that identity is formed not only in relation to the other or to social processes, but also in relation to the physical environment.

The second is regional identity which is used mainly in geography and sociology. Regarding this concept, Raagmaa (2002) defines it as follows: “regional identity is a deeply social, spatial, and historical (cultural) phenomenon that contains a stabilizing and changing, destructive and constructing character.” While the first, place identity, emphasizes the relationship with the physical world as space, regional identity emphasizes the relationship with the region in a sense that includes the socio-cultural environment.

The third is community identity. Smith, Davenport, Anderson & Leahy (2011) define this concept as, “the beliefs about the extent that landscape contributes to local culture, character and identity.” Here, it is considered that the environment and the events are connected to the personality of the individual.

The fourth is local identity, a concept that has a broader meaning than regional identity and is mainly used in environment design studies and landscape theories. Shao, Lange, & Thwaites (2017) define this concept as follows: “... small-scale places to provide features that create a recognisable image of the place and its residents to differentiate from other places. It provides special feelings through physical, social, sensory and memory perspectives; such feelings include both positive and negative emotions.” Local identity aims to encompass identity as diverse images associated with the region. At the same time, it is also characterized by the creation of an image of the place itself by distinguishing the inhabitants of the area from people in other areas.

From these definitions, we have the following elements that characterize the identity of the regional place. First, fundamentally, the following two form the basis,

(1) To strive for a “distinctiveness” between oneself and the people who do not live there through the intervention of the place,

(2) The existence of a social, cultural “continuity”,

In addition, due to the connection with the formation of the self, the following two points are important (Hatori, 2018),

(3) To have “self-esteem” related to the place,

(4) Feeling of “self-efficacy” based on the feeling of accessibility and ordinariness.

In Japan, local identity and regional identity have been translated into Japanese in a confusing way. However, the analysis above shows that as the identity related to the region, local identity that encompasses a variety of images connected to the region, is the most effective term for regional identity.

#### **4. Local identity as the agency**

The act of trying to connect to the concerned place based on the concept of local identity (and thus working on the activities of community revitalization), is also inherently a risky act. This is because involvement in changes in the region is none other than the involvement in the fluctuation of identity. Therefore, particularly for local identity, it is considered that this involvement is assured depending on (3) self-dignity and (4) self-efficacy.

Regarding the act of trying to get involved in a given place, we can refer to the concept of what is called “agency”. “Agency” is one of the social theories that deals with the extent to which human beings can actively control social conditions as “creative actors” (Fujieda, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. Further, Giddens defines this concept as follows; “the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the on-going process of events-in-the-world” (Giddens,1979). Here, “the on-going process of events-in-the-world” refers to the (2) “continuity” of element that characterizes the local identity shown above. In addition, if “corporeal beings” (that is, the material self and the physical self) become “the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions”, then this can be considered to mean (4) “self-efficacy”.

Later, Biesta & Tedder (2006) relied on pragmatism, defining agency as “ability to exert control over their”, and understood it as an ability achieved for the first time through temporary association with “contexts-for-action.” In other words, it is something that is understood to be formed as a unique and non-substitutable thing within the time-axis of each individual’s course of life, based on the relationship with the other, because of interactions between personal efforts, mobilizable resources, and contextual and structural factors (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Agency as “the unique and non-substitutable thing within the time-axis of each individual’s course of life”, can be considered as the above element (1) “distinctiveness” and element (2) “continuity” that assumes element (3) “self-esteem” and element (4) “self-efficacy”. Engaging in community revitalization based on local identity is, in other words, simply having agency for the community.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Forming a local identity and maintaining it is having agency, and here it becomes possible to find one meaning that the self is associated with a given place. It can also be said that local identity is always something that is embodied by us in the sense of being positioned as a life course. In this way, we become residents of that place, or become tourists and visitors. In addition, we become regional experience seekers and try to be independently involved in that place.

If that is the case, whether we are in a globalized world, or in a world that is going against globalization such as the Covid-19 pandemic caused by the coronavirus, in the process of forming as well as maintaining the self, we try to ensure our relationship with a place through agency. Having a profound association with a given place is none

other than having agency that eventually discovers the self in that place. Especially in this corona disaster, we are increasingly seeking a place to discover the self and seem to be seeking placeness there.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the following Website, <https://www.soumu.go.jp/kankeijinkou/>

<sup>2</sup> In the background of Agency theory, can be seen various problems concerning modern criticism, social structure and power, and loss of “subject”.

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