

AN EXPERIENTIAL METHOD
APPLIED TO A STUDY OF THE MEANING
OF PLACE

Nadine Meuti Wilbanks

I chose to apply this method to the meaning we find in the place in which we live. This is a subject which interests me greatly for I have personally experienced a profound sense of change in the meaning of my own existence that was determined by where I lived. Having lived my entire life in the Bay Area, at the age of 27, I married and moved to Oregon with my husband. During my first year there, I experienced a sense of culture shock where I felt an intense homesickness for the ethnic, cultural and intellectual richness of the Bay Area. We lived in Oregon for 11 years. Throughout our time there, I never felt at home. I felt alienated from the conservative community in which we lived. I did not share the values or interests of those I knew. Life felt very empty and lonely. My meaning was found in my relationship with my husband and in my solitary intellectual and spiritual pursuits. We finally returned to the Bay Area five years ago. Since that time, I have felt truly alive. The discovery that I am with like-minded people once again and feeling the freedom of not having to guard your words in conversations with others is exhilarating. The tolerance and openness of people of the Bay Area has embraced me. And, in addition to the openness of the Bay Area, I am thrilled by the beauty, the splendor of the creeping evening fog, the neighborhoods of Berkeley and the flowers in perpetual bloom. I am at home again.

It intrigues me that I have known people who have had the ability to live all over the country without a sense of change to the meaning in their lives. Are some more affected by their environment than others? Is it true that some can live anywhere and feel as at home as anywhere else? Are some people simply very adaptable where others, like me, have a great difficulty adapting to different environments? Does the place in which we live affect the meaning in our lives and if so, to what degree? Or does our meaning derive from an experience separate from the place in which we live?

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the place in which you live (your community) affect the meaning in your life?

EXPERIENTIAL METHOD

I selected five participants to respond to the research question based on their diversity. Each participant was asked to write spontaneously for 10 minutes in response to the research question.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

I expect that the research will show that people usually do receive a sense of meaning from where they live. Our communities help to shape our lives by providing a framework for our existence. In some places, that framework may be narrow and sharply defined, whereas, in other places, the framework may be broad and vaguely defined.

We receive this meaning mostly in the sense of shared community we have with others, with a feeling of belonging. The ability to feel that we are a part of a community whose values we share adds meaning to our lives. I believe the research will show that it is important for us to feel the freedom to be true to ourselves and to then have our true selves be accepted by others. It is meaningful to us to feel that we can connect with others, that there is a common bond between us.

Our community provides the setting from which the drama of our lives unfold. This setting may affect the drama by the degree of freedom allowed or the boundaries established. The setting may indeed impact the meaning in the dramas of our lives.

EXPERIENTIAL EXPRESSIONS (EE)

Participant 1 is a 40-year-old single white female. She has lived in the Bay Area her entire life although she had traveled widely. She is a manager in a very large organization.

Arriving here at birth puts me at a disadvantage regarding living anywhere else. I did not leave to appreciate this area. I developed a dependency to it.

I can't imagine, nor have I discovered another place in the world that provides the security via insecurity (EE1) (earthquakes, fires, aids, etc.); creates frustration regarding nourishment not for lack of food but because of excessive choice (EE2); allows one to practice religion based on personal beliefs and ideology (EE3) not structured, pre-packaged religious rules (i.e. as far from Rome as you can get and still be Catholic); forces you to understand diversity (EE4) by accepting how we have always lived as a cosmopolitan area; makes you regret spending money on a vacation when you arrive back home to the most beautiful views in the world (EE5). Combine all of the above with the fact that my friends and family share this area with me (EE6) and I realize why I'm here.

Participant 2 is a 30-year-old single Hispanic female. She immigrated to the United States from El Salvador when she was eleven years old. She works as a clerical assistant.

The best weather I have experienced up to this point (EE7):

- Not so hot
- Not so cold
- Not humid like the tropics

The diversity of people (EE8). To learn from all and be able to enrich my life (EE9) because of it, their good points and shortcomings:

- Race
- Cultures
- Customs
- Politics
- Religions
- Foods
- Beliefs

The abundance of choice (EE10):

- Education
- Job opportunities
- Malls/supermarkets

The many fun places (different/old/new) you can explore (EE11) just in California.

Most important: The choice I have to be an independent individual (EE12):

I do not need anyone to take care of me.

I can make it on my own until the end of my life.

I have a mind and a voice and to know that I'll be heard.

I can make a difference for others (EE13) less fortunate and younger than I by giving some of my free time and attention.

The many individuals that I have had the fortune to meet and to know and that I have made a difference for my personal development (EE14).

And to learn that no matter where I live, life is hard and difficult but to know that with a positive attitude you can overcome anything and everything (EE15).

Participant 3 is a 42-year-old married white female. She is the mother of 2 daughters under the age of 4. She works part-time as a Human Resource policy writer. She moved to the Bay Area from Chicago 15 years ago.

When I feel that I am in my community, the place where I live, I feel that I am the closest to being myself as I ever am (EE16). I feel like I belong (EE17). I have things in common with the people around me (EE18). We are sharing the same physical space, weather, seasons, etc.

At least, when I am in my community, I feel that way. When I don't like my community, I feel alienated (EE19), like I'm too different, that something is wrong with me.

I chose to live in the community I live in. I feel fortunate and that gives meaning to my life. *My community includes a diverse group of people, which represents endless possibilities for me to experience different things (EE20).* This sense of opportunity gives meaning to my life. I know people who are witches, Buddhists, lesbians, disabled, homeless, carless.

I have many roles in my community (EE21) mother, wife, homeowner, gardener and walker. I don't feel like I am just one thing and I'm not striving to be just one thing (EE22). That's not only acceptable but encouraged in my community.

Participant 4 is a 37 year old single black female. She grew up in the South and moved to the Bay Area when she was a teenager. She works as a recruiter for a health care organization.

The place I live adds meaning to my existence because of the people that are in the Bay Area (EE23). There are many nationalities in the Bay Area. Just the other day I met a young man from Kuwait who talked about how it was during the Desert Storm War. I was interesting to hear what it was like to live in Kuwait.

The people in the Bay Area are friendly and “everyone” and “everything” is accepted (EE24). This allows you to exist in an environment and not feel that you are being judged (EE25). You can really feel comfortable and be accepted as the individual you are (EE26).

I also enjoy the weather in the Bay Area (EE27). Especially on a beautiful, clear day, I enjoy going to the Marina and walking along the sand and look at the calmness of the ocean.

Especially after having a very hectic day at work.

Participant 5 is a 28 year old gay male who has lived his entire life in California. He moved to the Bay Area in 1992. He works as a payroll and benefit specialist for a very large organization.

I am a 28 year old gay male. I presently live in San Francisco. *I moved to S.F. in November of 1992 because of the feeling of community (EE28).*

The area I live in accepts and acknowledges my life style (EE29). This is very important to my well-being. I have a sense of support (EE30). I am able to be more active in the gay community. Having this acceptance and ability to socialize with other gay people brings harmony and happiness to my life (EE31).

EMERGENT EXPERIENTIAL THEMES

Physical Dimension of Place

EE1 I can't imagine, nor have I discovered another place in the world that provides the security via insecurity.

EE5 ... makes you regret spending money on a vacation when you arrive back home to the most beautiful views in the world...

EE7 ... the best weather I have experienced up to this point.

EE11 ... The many fun places (different/old/new) you can explore...

EE27 I also enjoy the weather in the Bay Area.

Tolerance of Diversity

EE 8 ... the diversity of people...

EE20 My community includes a diverse group of people which represents endless possibilities for me to experience different things.

EE23 The place I live adds meaning to my existence because of the people that are in the Bay Area.

EE24 "Everyone" and "Everything" is accepted.

Freedom To Be ... Personal Choice, Personal Growth

EE2 ... creates frustration regarding nourishment not for the lack of food but because of the excessive choice...

EE3 ... allows one to practice religion based on personal beliefs and ideologies...

EE4 ... forces you to understand diversity...

EE9 ... to learn from all and be able to enrich my life...

EE10 ... the abundance of choices...

EE12 Most important: the choice I have to be an independent individual.

EE13 I can make a difference for others.

EE14 ... the many individuals that I have had the fortune to meet and to know and that I have made a difference for my personal development.

EE15 No matter where I live, life is hard and difficult but to know that with a positive attitude you can overcome anything and everything.

EE16 I feel that I am the closest to being myself as I ever am.

EE20 My community includes a diverse group of people which represents endless possibilities for me to experience different things.

EE21 I have many roles in my community.

EE22 I don't feel like I am just one thing and I'm not striving to be just one thing.

EE23 This allows you to live in an environment and not feel that you are being judged.

EE29 The area that I live in accepts and acknowledges my lifestyle.

Belonging/Acceptance

EE6 My friends and family share this area with me.

EE17 I feel like I belong.

EE18 I have things in common with the people around me.

EE19 When I don't like my community, I feel alienated.

EE26 You can feel real comfortable and be accepted as the individual you are.

EE28 I moved to S.F. in November of 1992 because of the feeling of community.

EE30 I have a sense of support.

EE31 Having this acceptance and ability to socialize with other gay people brings harmony and happiness to my life.

THEMATIC AMPLIFICATION

Physical Dimension of Place

The themes that arise from the *Experiential Expressions* of the participants relate to the beauty and perfection of this place (“the best weather”; “the beautiful views in the world”) and the insecurity of living in a land of earthquakes and fires.

The physical dimension of place affects the meaning in the lives of the participants by providing them with an aesthetic sensibility. Living in the presence of beauty enhances our sense of well-being and perhaps even provides us with an opportunity to be in awe of life.

A paradox to this beauty is the sense of being off-balance due to the uncontrollable forces that are also characteristic of this environment. The earthquakes and fires mentioned by participant 1 are a grim reminder that all is not perfect despite the beauty that is inherent in this landscape.

This physical setting also allows for abundant choice in “the many fun places to explore.”

This environment provides us with beauty, danger and choice.

Tolerance of Diversity

The participants in this study noted the tolerance for diversity (“‘everyone’ and ‘everything’ is accepted” and “my community includes a diverse group of people”). This tolerance defines the boundaries of our existence. Because more is tolerated, greater freedom and choice is possible.

Freedom to Be ... Personal Choice, Personal Growth

The tolerance of diversity allows for expanded experience in our lives (“I have many roles in my community”; “creates frustration ... because of the excessive choice”; “the abundance of choices”). There are many ways “to be” here that are provided by the place in which we live. This allows for choices that provide opportunity for growth (“I have made a difference for my personal development”). The freedom to be, characteristic of the Bay Area, is something of value in the lives of the participants. Our lives are not confined by narrow definitions and few choices. We can be many things; Growth and choice are possible.

Belonging/Acceptance

The participants found meaning in the sense of shared community and belonging (“I have a sense of support”; “I feel like I belong”).

Belonging comes from a feeling of acceptance. (“You can feel real comfortable and be accepted for the individual you are.”) Without the tolerance, acceptance and belonging, the meaning in our lives would be impacted. The ability for all to be included as players in the drama is critical.

There is also a sense that it is through a feeling of belonging and identification with others, that we can truly be ourselves. (“I have things in common with the people around me.”; “Having this acceptance and ability to socialize with other gay people brings harmony and happiness to my life.”) It is apparent that we do not exist alone and our need to belong with and be accepted by others is, in most cases, critical to our sense of well-being.

REFLECTIVE SYNTHESIS

The participants in this study confirm that our community affects the meaning in our lives. Our community can be viewed as the setting for the play of life where our personal dramas unfold. The setting, the props and all that is allowed or controlled by them provide a framework for what is possible. In this case, the physical dimension of place provides a backdrop for the action of the play.

Two themes arose from the responses of participants that illustrate the mythical paradise that is California. California exists in our minds as a paradise of beauty and perfection. Yet at the same time, we are faced with the grim reality that all is transient. The absurd forces of nature threaten to destroy our bliss without a moment's notice.

This place in which we live presents the paradox of life itself, its beauty and its transience. We are faced with near perfection and almost unbearable beauty and yet are constantly reminded that it is fleeting and that nothingness may await.

The importance ascribed to the diversity of the people by the participants leads one to ask if the tolerance that is so representative of the Bay Area arises from the experience of living on the edge by our constant confrontation with absurdity. Perhaps this awareness has allowed us to be more open to the richness of varied experience. While I am sure that many would prefer the safety and security of a more mundane existence, others are enchanted with the thrill of living here with its splendor and danger.

Here, all the players can be included in the drama for the level of acceptance is high. The people are the characters in the on-going drama of place. Indeed, with our broad acceptance, the players represent "every person" we are all unique yet we are one. Because we are free to choose our own roles, indeed to write our own scripts, we are free to shape the meaning in our lives to a greater degree than might be possible if we lived in Kansas.

It is through this choice that growth is possible and that our meaning is defined. Our environment provides for us the gift and responsibility of choice. It makes meaning possible.

Notes

- 1) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities Using Metaphysics and Phenomenology* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990).
- 2) Sunnie D. Kidd, "Thematic Methodology" (inbetweenness.com 2008).
- 3) Sunnie D. Kidd, "A Practical Application of the Experiential Method" (inbetweenness.com 2008).