

Theorizing Critical Placemaking as a Tool for Reclaiming Public Space

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Abstract As economic inequality and segregation continue to grow in the U.S., psychology has an important role to play in exploring and promoting processes that can disrupt social injustice. This paper identifies the privatization of public space as a social problem that contributes to the entrenchment of social, economic, and racial inequality, and advances “critical placemaking” as a tool for reclaiming public space for public use. Drawing from key concepts in environmental psychology, narrative psychology, and community psychology, the proposed framework seeks to theorize the processes by which placemaking may contribute to transforming community narratives and building more inclusive, participatory, and democratic communities. Policy implications and future directions for empirical work are discussed.

Keywords Placemaking · Public space · Narrative · Economic inequality · Place identity · Place attachment · Civic engagement

Introduction

The ability to access and participate in public space has profound implications for well-being and life chances. “Placemaking” has emerged as a growing movement in which citizens participate in creating and transforming the spaces they inhabit with the goal of “strengthen[ing] the connection between people and the places they share”

(Project for Public Spaces, 2016). The power of place-based awareness and action to illuminate and address social inequities has long been used by various activists and organizations, yet very little social psychological theory and research has been applied to understanding these processes. Community psychology has much to lend to theorizing how the relationship between individuals, places, stories, and communities might play a role in the process of placemaking, and how these processes might contribute to transforming community narratives and reproducing or resisting systems of oppression.

The purpose of this analysis is to theorize critical placemaking as a tool for accessing and transforming public places into spaces of dialogue, inclusion, and democratic participation. I begin by providing an overview for the psychological significance of public space and outline a definition and brief history of placemaking. I then propose an integrative theoretical framework for critical placemaking in three parts. First, drawing from environmental psychology, I discuss the *co-constitutive relationship between person and place*, rooted in Barker’s theory of behavior settings (1968), Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff’s theory of place identity (1983) and Low and Altman’s (1992) concept of place attachment. Second, drawing from narrative psychology, I suggest that critical placemaking can act as a *platform for dialogue* by revealing the polyphonic (i.e., many-voiced) nature of the public and helping to develop more inclusive community narratives. Here, I utilize cultural-historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Hammack and Cohler’s theory of master narrative engagement (2009) in order to explore the relationship between the personal, social, and political nature of stories. Third, drawing from community psychology, I argue that critical placemaking can be a *platform for conscientization and empowerment* (Freire, 2005; Martín-Baró, 1994;

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Rappaport, 1995), revealing contestation and developing an active, transformative relationship between people and the places they inhabit, helping to plant seeds for action.

In the second section of the paper, I discuss placemaking in the context of a real-world social problem: the rise of privatization and the erosion of public places. Privatization describes the process of transferring the ownership and control of property from the government to private individuals or companies to be used for profit. I provide a brief historical overview of the increasing privatization of public space in the United States in recent decades and explore the implications and problems associated with this trend. First, privatization works to constrain who can access and participate in public space, resulting in places that are more exclusive and segregated. Second, the privatization of public space constrains whose stories and histories are represented and told, resulting in places and narratives that are monologic (i.e., singular). Third, privatization constrains what kinds of interactions and behaviors a place can afford, resulting in public spaces that are depoliticized, commodified, and passive. For these reasons, I argue that the process of privatization contributes to the entrenchment of socioeconomic and racial inequality, social alienation, and political disengagement. I conclude by offering placemaking as a way to reclaim public places for public use and discussing future directions for empirical research.

The Material, Narrative, and Political Significance of Public Space

Public space is, above all, shared space, characterized by public ownership, open accessibility, and intersubjectivity (Kohn, 2004). In other words, a space is considered public if it is “owned by the government, accessible to everyone without restriction, and/or fosters communication and interaction” (p. 11). This includes places such as streets, sidewalks, parks, plazas, playgrounds, squares, waterfronts, public libraries, public transportation, community centers, and markets.

In addition to functioning as material sites of publicly accessible resources, public spaces are important sites of social interaction and dialogue. Our thoughts, identities, and interactions shape and are shaped by these locations of everyday collective meaning making. Public places offer a common ground for individuals from diverse backgrounds to intersect and engage with one another. Research has shown that access to public spaces enhances social capital and is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008) and sense of community (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012), allowing for

social bonding and bridging by providing community members with space to linger and mingle.

Public spaces are also vital sites of political engagement where community members can exercise their rights of expression and assembly (Parkinson, 2012). From the Civil Rights marches to LGBT Pride parades to Occupy Wall Street, “taking to the streets” has been a critical way for citizens to join together, raise consciousness, and fight for liberation. These struggles from U.S. history illustrate not only the power of reclaiming the right to belong and participate in physical space, but also the power of seizing control of a story by decentering the dominant voice to make room for critical perspectives from the margins. The right to access and transform these shared narratives and places is essential to upholding democracy (Di Masso, 2012; Fraser, 1990).

Finally, public places are sites of social reproduction. The role of public places in shaping life chances and the ability to be an active member of society cannot be understated. Yet public places have historically been stratified places where women, low-income people, and people of color have been disproportionately excluded and displaced (Kohn, 2004; Massey, 1990; Sutton & Kemp, 2011). Regulation and policing of public space, such as stop-and-frisk and anti-homeless policies, often construct marginalized bodies as “out of control” and “out of place” (Mitchell, 1995). The quality of our air, water, housing, public services, and access to education and jobs are also stratified along lines of race and class (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2001). For example, low-income people and people of color are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, and are exposed to higher levels of toxins, air and water pollution, and noise, and suffer from higher rates of infant mortality, cancer, lead poisoning, and other health problems (Mele, 2011). Patterns of hypersegregation and hyperghettoization persist in many U.S. cities, leading to the concentration of poverty in many predominantly black neighborhoods and environments that reproduce extreme disadvantage (Massey, 1990; Quillian, 2014; Wacquant, 2010). Thus, the physical and social construction of public places has profound implications for reproducing (and resisting) systems of social inequality.

Theorizing Critical Placemaking

Overview of Placemaking: Definition, History, and Examples

“Placemaking” is a bottom-up, asset-based, person-centered process that emphasizes collaboration and community participation in order to improve the livability

of towns and cities (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). While these initiatives often focus on urban settings, they hold relevance for rural areas as well and have been practiced in a variety of regions (see Gadwa Nicodemus, 2014). In the past decade, “creative placemaking” as a movement has begun to receive widespread funding and attention from federal agencies such as The National Endowment for the Arts to nonprofit organizations such as The Project for Public Spaces. The majority of these initiatives focus on the role of arts and culture in rejuvenating the physical, social, and economic dimensions of urban life in the midst of post-deindustrialization and suburbanization (Lees & Melhuish, 2015).

Yet many placemaking initiatives have been critiqued as apolitical and exclusive (Bedoya, 2013; Lees & Melhuish, 2015; Loughran, 2014). Placemaking’s “revitalization” efforts frequently focus on beautifying, cleaning, and regenerating public spaces for promoting development and attracting investment while neglecting considerations of economic and racial inequality (Bedoya, 2013). In catering to elites and the “creative class,” this restructuring can contribute to the displacement of marginalized residents (Doucet, van Kempen, & van Weesep, 2011). Furthermore, the focus on commonality rather than difference can obscure the plural and often contested nature of communities (Sharp, Pollock, & Paddison, 2005), such as public artworks and memorials that celebrate European colonial history while erasing the histories and identities of American Indian peoples (Loewen, 1999). Still, research suggests that placemaking has the potential to challenge the status quo by promoting social inclusion and a sense of belonging (Thomas, Pate, & Ranson, 2015), rendering the stories and histories of marginalized groups visible (Baca, 2005; Hayden, 1994), and providing a unifying framework for mobilizing collective action (Martin, 2003). For these reasons, this paper will focus on what I term “critical placemaking”: efforts that attend to inequities and work to promote social justice by disrupting systems of domination and creating public places that are accessible and inclusive, plural, and participatory. Although this concept has been studied in some capacity in fields such as urban studies and architecture (see Sutton & Kemp, 2011), this paper makes a novel contribution by taking a psychological approach to critical placemaking that weaves together literature on place, narrative, community, and socioeconomic inequality.

Despite the surge in attention to the methods and outcomes of placemaking, the process itself remains undertheorized (Moss, 2012; Palermo & Ponzini, 2015). The purpose of this analysis is to advance a theoretical framework for “critical placemaking,” grounded in key concepts from environmental psychology, narrative psychology, and community psychology.

Environmental Psychology and the Co-constitution of Person and Place

Understanding place is critical to understanding human thought, behavior, and social relations. Yet, the role of the environment in psychological processes is often neglected in favor of individual characteristics, reflecting what Shinn and Toohey (2003) call “context minimization error.” This reductionist tendency to strip away “epiphenomenal,” contextual dimensions of human experience, such as location and culture, in search of underlying universal truths stems from a dualistic Cartesian separation between the mental and material realms, contributing to a devaluation of everyday embodied experience that stubbornly persists in much psychological research (Reed, 1996).

In contrast, environmental psychology is characterized by a dynamic, co-constitutive, transactional approach to psychological processes in which the fundamental unit of analysis is the organism-environment system (Dewey, 1896; Heft, 2001). Kurt Lewin (1943/1997) was one of the earliest psychologists to emphasize the importance of the environment in understanding human behavior, proposing that behavior is a function of the relationship between the structure and state of the person and the physical environment—captured in his field theory equation, $B = f(P, E)$. The premise that place informs how we think and act served as the foundation for Roger Barker’s theory of behavior settings (1968). A behavior setting “consists of one or more standing patterns of behavior” occurring in a milieu (Barker, 1968, p. 18), arising naturally out of collective, interdependent behavior in a specific location with discernible boundaries (Heft, 2001). Importantly, behavior settings are *extra-individual*, meaning that the patterns of behavior in the environment have characteristics that are relatively stable regardless of the individual actors within it. The concept that behavior is place-specific and that situations and places are equal if not better predictors of behavior than individual characteristics lends strong theoretical support to placemaking as a process for catalyzing change.

Place Identity and Place Attachment

The environment also plays a co-constitutive role in how we understand our individual, group, and cultural identities. The concept of “place identity” was theorized by environmental psychologists Proshansky et al. (1983) as a substructure of the self that includes memories of environments through which we develop a sense of recognition and familiarity, norms and expectations about the purposes and behaviors afforded by particular spaces, and knowledge about how to modify our environments to reflect our needs and wants. Place can also facilitate a sense of belonging, attachment, and purpose (Low &

Altman, 1992; Proshansky et al., 1983). Low and Altman (1992) explain that “place attachment” is an emotional bond with place, a sense of “insidedness,” that develops through shared cultural, historical, and political meaning and activities. Attachment has been found to be influenced by a wide variety of physical and social factors, including residence length, home ownership, mobility, neighborhood relations, neighborhood legibility, social capital, aesthetic qualities, green space, and access to services (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003; Fernández & Langhout, 2014; Lewicka, 2011). Empirical studies suggest that place attachment is related to a higher sense of self-esteem and pride, stronger neighborhood ties, collective efficacy, and civic engagement (Brown et al., 2003; Lewicka, 2005).

The Political Nature of Place Construction

Recently, scholars have drawn attention to the contested social and political nature of place, place-identity, and place attachment (Di Masso, Dixon, & Durrheim 2013; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). Feelings of agency and belonging in a particular context are experienced differently by individuals depending on their social location (Manzo, 2005). Gender, race, and social class are all implicated in how much power individuals and groups have over what happens to their communities (Hayden, 1994). The ability to occupy and participate in public space is mediated through the physical structures and regulation of the environment (Whyte, 1980) and through discourse used to imbue places with political meaning (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). Dixon and Durrheim (2000) argue, “Language becomes the force that binds people to places. It is through language that everyday experiences of self-in-place form and mutate; moreover, it is through language that places themselves are imaginatively constituted in ways that carry implications for ‘who we are’ (or ‘who we claim to be’)” (p. 32).

These key concepts from environmental psychology demonstrate that human thought and experience cannot be understood aside from the settings in which they take place. As embodied beings, the places in which we engage in activity are a rich source of experiential learning (Reed, 1996), influencing norms and patterns of behavior as well as a sense of identity and attachment. This co-constitutive, active, dynamic relationship between people and their environments lends strong theoretical support to placemaking as a pathway for social change.

Narrative Psychology and the Dialogic Co-construction of Meaning

Attending to the stories that are told in, about, and by the places in which we live our lives is key to

understanding how they are constructed, what implications they have for individual and collective identities and notions of belonging, and how they can be changed. Understanding human experience as storied gained traction during psychology’s interpretive turn (Cohler, 1982; Tappan, 1997) or what Bruner (1990, p. 106) called the “contextual revolution”, taking up narrative as a root metaphor for understanding human behavior (Sarbin, 1986). As encultured beings, humans use language as a tool to selectively engage with and transform their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The notion that human activity is culturally mediated through language can be understood through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory, largely rooted in Vygotsky’s work (1978), highlighting how meaning is dialogically co-constructed through social interaction.

The process of narrative construction is inherently political. The public realm is fundamentally plural and contested, filled with multiple competing discourses that are never neutral in terms of their political and historical power (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). Although a community is polyphonic (composed of many voices), the ruling class attempts to create a single hegemonic story to maintain the status quo (Bakhtin, 1984). This monologic story can be thought of as a master narrative: a dominant discourse that portrays itself as natural, unanimous, and eternal, working to silence alternative narratives (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Thomas & Rappaport, 1996). By excluding marginalized perspectives from consideration in “the public,” master narratives mask inequality and reproduce existing social relations. For example, research on housed and unhoused community members in the U.S. by Toolis and Hammack (2015) shows how discourse framing unhoused people as *out of control* and *out of place* served as a justification for their punishment and removal. Through a process called master narrative engagement, individuals make sense of their own personal experiences through dialogue with these existing cultural narratives, which they may reproduce or resist (Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Cohler, 2009).

Stories about Place, Identity, and Belonging

Stories about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going are embedded within the symbols, structures, and normative practices in public spaces (Thomas & Rappaport, 1996), creating what Rappaport (2000) terms a “setting narrative”.

Setting narratives provide insight as to how identity is constructed on a collective level. Statues, memorials, and monuments, for example, are common features of public space that represent the identity, values, and past of a community. Brockmeier’s (2002) study of a memorial to

the 1933 Nazi bookburning in Bebelplatz, Berlin illuminates how physical features of public places can function to reconstruct a narrative of past events, serving as an index for individual and cultural remembering. Yet, not all community members find their stories equally represented in the public landscape. Less than 8% of statues in public places in the US are of women (Shane, 2011), and even fewer are of racial or ethnic minorities (Hayden, 1994).

Furthermore, the meaning of stories told in and by public places may vary depending on social identity. A study by Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) compared “traditional” Irish citizens (defined as those who participated in traditional activities such as speaking the Irish language and belonging to Irish organizations) to “nontraditional” citizens in terms of how they perceived historic sites in Ireland, including the General Post Office, the location of the 1916 revolutionary uprising to free the Irish Republic from British rule. Their study found that the “traditional” group saw the General Post Office as a positive place associated with patriotism, independence, and freedom, while the “nontraditional” group saw this as a negative place associated with shame, anger, sadness, and violence (1997).

Who belongs and does not belong in a place is negotiated through stories, communicated through symbolic features of the physical environment. For example, until Apartheid in South Africa was abolished in 1994, “whites only” signs and laws worked to promote racial segregation and dehumanizing treatment toward people of color in public spaces. Such messages can also be communicated through interpersonal interactions. Research by Dixon and Durrheim (2004) found that narratives of white users of a recently desegregated public beach in South Africa constructed black visitors as out of place, unsafe, and disruptive.

Placemaking as a Platform for Dialogue

Setting narratives are powerful symbolic resources—resources with the ability to oppress or liberate (Rappaport, 2000; Thomas & Rappaport, 1996). By framing certain groups as outsiders, out of place, or not full members of the public, these setting narratives can serve as the basis for exclusion, delegitimization, and dehumanization (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Tileagă, 2007). On the other hand, by revealing the polyphonic and relational nature of the public and constructing a more inclusive story, setting narratives can disrupt master narratives and work to reclaim public space for public use. Here, I theorize placemaking as a platform for inclusive and transformative dialogue. The idea that public places are socially constructed through narrative disrupts the perception that

the structures and patterns of behavior in those places are natural, static, and immutable and reveals the active, creative role of social actors as agents of change rather than passive consumers of place (Thomas & Rappaport, 1996).

First, placemaking can work to challenge the dominant narrative by revealing the polyphonic nature of the public. The public is not monolithic, but plural (Fraser, 1990). Private spaces are inherently more exclusive, mediated, and homogenous than public places, meaning that public places are one of the few places where community members can encounter worldviews and perspectives that are different from their own. The act of engaging and communicating in this diverse realm allows us to come to recognize and understand the worlds of others, and even to incorporate their words and experiences into our own stories (Bakhtin, 1992).

Critical placemaking allows for the representation and remembrance of histories previously rendered invisible, which can challenge the unanimity of master narratives. For instance, Hayden’s (1994) “Power of Place” project featured walking tours and a collaboratively designed public art installation in Los Angeles on the life history of Biddy Mason, a working class African American woman and former slave who fought for and won emancipation. Mason worked in L.A. as a nurse and midwife delivering hundreds of children in the community, later becoming a landowner and charitable philanthropist who helped to found a school and church. Whereas the majority of historic architecture and preservation efforts in the U.S. serve to celebrate the history of elite white men, this project sought to render visible the influence of working people, and especially women of color, on the history of the community, to acknowledge their struggles, and to consider the relevance of the community’s cultural heritage of civic engagement for the present. Illuminating these histories expands the setting narrative to make room for a plurality of voices and the importance of their lives and contributions.

Second, providing a space for community members occupying different social positions and perspectives to encounter one another affords opportunities to develop more inclusive *community narratives* (Rappaport, 2000)—shared stories held in common by a group of people to remind them of their identity, values, and beliefs. “The stories a society tells about itself,” write Thomas and Rappaport (1996, p. 318), “are the glue that hold its citizens together”. In doing so, placemaking links personal narratives to collective narratives, thereby creating bridging capital, contributing to a stronger civic fabric and more resilient communities (Putnam, 2000), and serving as the basis for collective mobilization (Thomas & Louis, 2013).

Community Psychology and Altering Boundaries of Participation in Public Space

By participating in critical placemaking, individuals may develop a sense of place identity and attachment and engage in the dialogic construction of their personal and community narratives. But for critical placemaking to affect social structures and contribute to transformation it must be connected to praxis. To connect the relationship between people, place, and narrative to community participation, I draw upon key concepts from the field of community psychology: namely, conscientization and empowerment. As an action-oriented, ecologically sensitive paradigm with an overt commitment to social justice and liberation, community psychology is well-suited to theorize how shaping environments- and the social relations they engender- might act as a tool for altering boundaries of participation and effecting social change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Placemaking as a Tool for Conscientization

The first way in which critical placemaking can contribute to social change is by facilitating conscientization, defined as “a mobilization of consciousness aiming to produce historic knowledge about oneself and about the groups to which one belongs, thereby producing a different understanding, and giving sense to one’s temporal and spatial place in the society, and in one’s specific life-world” (Montero, 2009b, pp. 73–74). Master narratives of reality are monological and mythologizing, objectifying the oppressed and subordinating their transformative power so that they live in what Freire (2005) calls the “culture of silence”. Key to deconstructing this hegemony is the process of problematization: questioning and doubting beliefs and assumptions previously taken for granted (Montero, 2009a). Through dialogue and reflection, the oppressed learn to “read” the world- learn the language of critique and possibility- and author their own history by realizing their capacity as subjects rather than objects (Martín-Baró, 1994).

By facilitating dialogic encounter, recovering plural and contested histories, revealing the socially constructed nature of spatial relations, and articulating the important social issues of one’s local context, critical placemaking can serve as a pathway for critical awareness and critical action. Learning is not limited to the formal educational realm (Freire, 2005); public places act as environments of everyday learning and critical pedagogy in which all community members are both teachers and students. In this way, engaging in critical placemaking could facilitate participants’ ability to question and reflect on the systems that produce oppression (Martín-Baró, 1994), shedding

light on what Rappaport (2000) calls “tales of terror” hidden in the dominant narrative of the community. For example, the New York Civil Liberties Union and activist collective The Illuminator projected a “Wheel of Justice” onto a warehouse wall in New York. Local community members on the street passing by could take a turn spinning the wheel, which landed on different outcomes for poor people within the criminal justice system such as “eviction,” “go to jail,” and “ignored” (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2014). Each outcome was accompanied by a vignette of a real resident whose life had been devastated by the broken criminal justice system, and afterward participants were asked to sign a letter to the governor demanding systemic change. This project illustrates the role of placemaking in exposing injustice and transforming the street into a site of critical consciousness-raising coupled with civic action. Developing an awareness of the physical structures and social relations of public space not as static, natural, and eternal but as dynamic, unfinished, and transformable creates space for imagining and enacting alternative possibilities.

Placemaking as a Tool for Empowerment and Civic Engagement

Second, critical placemaking can serve as a tool for civic engagement by facilitating empowerment. Empowerment is defined as “a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environments, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization” (Maton, 2008, p. 5). Empowerment is not a universal concept but varies depending on the community, and involves individual, organizational, and community levels of analysis (Zimmerman, 1995).

I propose that critical placemaking facilitates empowerment by reimagining and transforming our relationship with place, our relationships to others, and our understanding of what behaviors and actions are possible in public places. First, I suggest that critical placemaking can help to reimagine and transform how we conceptualize the self in relation to place. Boundaries of participation in public places often permit individuals to occupy public space only as spectators and passive consumers (Kohn, 2008; Sandlin, Burdick, & Norris, 2012); opportunities to actively participate in decision making that shapes the creation and transformation of spatial structures and the relations embedded within them tend to be limited to elite policymakers, planners, developers, and investors. Research shows that place attachment is associated with collective efficacy (Brown et al., 2003) and feelings of responsibility for one’s community (Lenzi, Vieno, Pastore,

& Santinello, 2013). These findings suggest that critical placemaking, as a collaborative, active, bottom up process, could promote a sense of self as subject, meaning maker, civic actor, and agent of sociopolitical change in public settings.

Participating in placemaking processes also allows for a reimagining of our relationships across diverse groups in the community, building social capital. Social capital refers to the social networks, norms, and relationships that link people together, be they formal or informal, that facilitate cooperation, reciprocity, and trust within and between groups (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2001). Dimensions of social capital include neighboring behaviors, citizen participation, collective efficacy, and sense of community (Perkins & Long, 2002). Social capital, and sense of community in particular, is related to higher feelings of control over one's local environment and thus can help to lessen the adverse effects of negative environmental conditions (Aiello & Baum, 1979). Sense of community is determined both by geographical and relational factors, and is characterized by "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met by their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Finally, by enhancing a sense of agency and belonging within the context of public places, critical placemaking facilitates empowerment by laying the groundwork for civic engagement and the ability to collectively demand and exercise rights (Montero, 2009a). Civic engagement may be conceptualized as "the feelings of responsibility toward the common good, the actions aimed at solving community issues and improving the well-being of its members and the competencies required to participate in civic life" (Lenzi et al., 2013, p. 45). Strong neighborhood ties and sense of community, which are associated with place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992; Perkins & Long, 2002), have been linked to higher levels of community involvement and civic engagement (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Saegert, 1989). A psychological model proposed and confirmed by Chavis and Wandersman (1990) found that sense of community was a cause and effect of local action. Interest in one's own history and the history of one's place has also been found to mediate the connection between place attachment and civic engagement (Lewicka, 2005).

To summarize the proposed theoretical framework, environmental psychology literature on behavior settings, place identity, and place attachment demonstrates that place plays an active and co-constitutive role in shaping our sense of self, our behavior, and our relationships (Barker, 1968; Low & Altman, 1992; Proshansky et al., 1983). Starting from the person-environment system as a

unit of analysis, these concepts support the idea that engaging in the creation of public settings that are more bottom-up, inclusive, and participatory could in turn act as a pathway to changing the thoughts and actions of the people in that setting. Because language is the tool that we use to selectively engage with and transform our environment (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978), this framework advances narrative as a useful way to conceptualize how we construct (and can reconstruct) belonging and participation in public space. Critical placemaking offers a way to represent alternative stories that may disrupt the universality of master narratives that function to exclude the bodies and histories of marginalized community members. Finally, community psychology links place and narrative to civic engagement using the concepts of conscientization and empowerment (Freire, 2005; Martín-Baró, 1994; Rappaport, 1995, 2000). By rendering inequities and exclusions visible, cultivating a sense of interdependence, and facilitating more control over the resources and settings that affect their lives, critical placemaking is theorized as a way to infuse everyday activity with an awareness of injustice and possibility, thereby increasing opportunities for civic action.

The Problem of Privatization and the Erosion of Public Space

I now turn to apply critical placemaking to a real world problem: the privatization of public space in the United States. It is important to consider the ways in which psychology can act as a resource to address social injustice and contribute to democratic transformation. "We are at a moment in political history in which working with policymakers and with communities must be at the center of any movement of scholars concerned with social justice," state Fine and Barreras (2001). In focusing on the privatization of public space, I draw attention to the problem of uneven development and the role this process plays in perpetuating unequal power relations. First, I provide a brief historical overview of this trend through a political economic lens. I then review literature illustrating how the privatization of public space, fueled by processes of neoliberalization, works to create spaces that are increasingly segregated, monologic, and depoliticized. By restricting spatial and class mobility, reproducing a master narrative of fear, and eroding civic identity and engagement, I argue that these processes of privatization both conceal and reproduce social inequality. I conclude by applying critical placemaking as a tool for resisting privatization and reclaiming public space for public use.

The Privatization of Public Space: An Overview

Patterns of privatization and inequality in cities are not natural, inevitable processes, but have been driven by patterns of de-industrialization, suburbanization, and the rise of neoliberalism, which promotes values of free trade, competition, and individual choice and the belief that a thriving market is the source of progress and well-being (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Since the 1980s, “roll back” and “roll out” neoliberalism have fueled a political and economic restructuring of space in the U.S. Cities “rolled back” government oversight, removing land use regulations and dismantling the welfare state, and “rolled out” subsidies and tax incentives to attract capital from the private sector (Peck & Tickell, 2002). As more and more power shifted to the market, the power of local governments and residents shrank dramatically, as did investments in public space and infrastructure (Dreier et al., 2001; Katz, 2006). Evidence of the increasing privatization of public resources and spaces is ubiquitous, from the advertisements and malls that dominate urban downtowns (the U.S. has over twice as much square feet of retail space per citizen as any other country [Hayden, 2009]) to the private management of city parks, public transportation, parking, sanitation, public resources, and the use of private security to police public spaces (MacLeod, 2002; Savas, 1991). This has contributed to what urban scholars call the “Disneyfication” of public places (Amster, 2003; Mitchell, 1995), which promotes security, cleanliness, and order through private management and surveillance (Zukin, 1998).

Gentrification, Fortress Spaces, and the Removal of the Poor from Public Space

The privatization of public space contributes to socioeconomic and racial inequality by creating spaces that are more exclusive and segregated. Today, the U.S. has the highest spatial inequality and income inequality of all countries in the global North (Dreier et al., 2001). The commodification of place and the exclusion of poor and low-income residents have been driven by gentrification, a product of roll back/roll out neoliberalism. Gentrification is a restructuring of place in which low-income residents are displaced and excluded by higher income residents, resulting in more socially, economically, and racially homogenous spaces (Shaw, 2008).

Another hallmark of neoliberalism was the devolution of federal and state power to local jurisdictions, forcing cities to subsist primarily on locally generated revenue (Sutton & Kemp, 2011; Swanstrom, Dreier, & Mollenkopf, 2002). This shift encouraged cities to remove poor and low-income residents, who were seen as

“burdensome” and “undesirable,” in order to attract more “valuable” residents and investors and thus make the city more competitive (Cahill, 2006; Swanstrom et al., 2002). This was done through discriminatory housing policies, anti-homeless ordinances, and restrictive land-use policies, and was also reflected in the built environment with the emergence of “fortress” spaces and “defensible” architecture, characterized by militaristic designs intended to deter crime and increase social control and security (Davis, 1992; Low, 2001; Shepard & Smithsimon, 2011). Examples of defensible architecture that became popular in recent decades include gated communities, enclosed malls and parking structures, metal detectors, and fences and identification checking systems at homeless shelters and public housing projects (Davis, 1992; Longstreth, 2006; Whyte, 1980). These types of inaccessible, defensive environments construct physical barriers that restrict interaction between different social groups and co-opt public spaces for the pleasure and profit of elite users (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

As economic segregation restricts spatial and economic mobility, it exacerbates the devastating effects of poverty. For example, although low-cost and government subsidized housing is mainly located in poor urban areas, these areas have fewer job opportunities than their suburban counterparts, meaning that those who are most in need of jobs are the most physically removed from those jobs (Squires & Kubrin, 2005; Swanstrom et al., 2002). For residents without a car or access to reliable transportation, this spatial separation poses a significant problem. Low-income community members who are displaced by processes of privatization, or are the targets of broken-windows policing, discriminatory policies, traffic stops, and increased surveillance by closed-circuit cameras report feelings of stress and trauma (ArchCity Defenders, 2014; Chaskin & Joseph, 2015). When poor and low-income people do get ticketed and fined, even for minor infractions, they are often unable to afford the fees and risk being sent to jail, losing their driver’s license, job, and/or losing their housing (ArchCity Defenders, 2014).

Spatial inequities also contribute to disparities in physical health. For example, compared to middle and high-income neighborhoods, areas of concentrated poverty have fewer large grocery stores, limiting residents’ access to fresh, nutritious food. Residents instead must often rely on fast-food and convenience stores with foods high in sodium, sugar, and fat, which are associated with higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (Walker, Keane, & Burke, 2010). Research also suggests that low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards, with higher levels of exposure to air pollution, unclean water, and lead paint (Dreier et al., 2001; Pastor, Morello-

Frosch, & Sadd, 2005). Access to green spaces that allow for physical activity is also stratified by race and income (Dai, 2011).

Stigma and social alienation are another way in which uneven development may hamper psychological well-being and life chances. Those who are isolated in disinvested neighborhoods of concentrated poverty witness daily symbolic reminders of their abandonment and marginal status in rows of vacant homes, boarded up storefronts, derelict playgrounds, and the absence of grocery stores, hospitals, green spaces, and adequate public transportation (Draus, Roddy, & McDuffie, 2014). Neighborhood disinvestment can be highly demoralizing, as articulated by Wacquant (2010),

The physical disrepair and institutional dilapidation of the neighborhood cannot but generate an abiding *sense of social inferiority* by communicating to its residents that they are second or third-class citizens undeserving of the attention of city officials and of the care of its agencies.

(p. 217)

Place-based stigma has the potential to harm communities by causing residents to disassociate from one another, retreat to their homes, or leave the neighborhood. Furthermore, residents of disinvested communities often face discrimination by others outside the neighborhood, who may regard them as less responsible, competent, or employable (Wacquant, 2010).

Justifying Privatization: A Master Narrative of Fear

The privatization of public space produces and is a product of a master narrative, or dominant cultural script, of fear (Low, 2006; Zukin, 1998). The displacement of poor and low income community members through gentrification and fortress spaces prevents the risk of encountering difference. When observing and interviewing residents of gated communities, anthropologist Setha Low found that fear of crime and those perceived as “others” such as immigrants, low-income people, and newcomers played a large role in motivating participants’ decisions to relocate to gated communities, despite the fact that crime rates in the U.S. have fallen in recent decades (2001). Low explained, “The discourse of urban fear encodes other social concerns including class, race, and ethnic exclusivity as well as gender. It provides a verbal component that complements, even reinforces, the visual landscape of fear created by the walls, gates, and guards” (Low, 2001, p. 56).

Narratives of fear are employed to justify processes of privatization in public space. Punishment and

disinvestment in poor communities are legitimated by attributing urban blight to poor and working class community members and stereotyping them as criminal, at-risk, undeserving, or lazy (Bullock, Fraser Wyche, & Williams, 2001). These stereotypes are circulated through interpersonal interactions as well as media framing that devalues working class and low-income people (especially those without housing and those receiving welfare) and negatively portrays them as outsiders lacking competence and morals (Bullock, 2008; Bullock et al., 2001; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). Cahill (2006) writes that these “stereotypes are critical in securing the consent of members of the public, who witness the transformation of the community and accept the ‘social costs’ of gentrification as inevitable and even as a sign of progress” (p. 346). After conducting participatory research with low-income women of color in the Lower East Side of New York City, Cahill (2006) concluded that discourses of “risk” were used as a tool of control and removal, where the bodies of marginalized “others” were scrutinized and their presence held responsible for the neighborhood’s deterioration.

Master narratives of fear constructed in and projected onto public space conceal class structure and justify the distribution of resources upwards. Keeping attention on threats perceived to be posed by marginalized populations allows systems that produce inequality to go unnoticed and those that gain power from such systems to go uncriticized (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). A series of experiments with middle-class U.S. participants showed that although the majority overtly denied having positive attitudes toward the rich, a test of their implicit attitudes revealed a clear pro-rich bias (Horowitz & Dovidio, 2017). Research findings also show that Americans—especially those who report a higher socioeconomic status—consistently overestimate social mobility (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Yet in reality, the middle class has much more in common with the poor than the rich. Whereas the average incomes of the poorest quintile in the U.S. over the past three decades increased by 6% and the middle quintile by 21%, the top 1% grew by an astounding 230% (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Increasing physical and social distance between social classes obscures the relational nature of the class structure, allowing elites to portray their wealth as hard-earned instead of made at the expense of poor and working class people.

The Depoliticization of Public Space

The shift in power from public to private control has profound implications for civic identity and democratic participation. As the spaces we occupy become increasingly depoliticized and built primarily for consumers rather than

citizens, any emphasis on collective rights, welfare, and responsibility is eclipsed by the neoliberal ideal of individual well-being and choice (Katz, 2006). Geographer and environmental psychologist Cindi Katz asks, “What kind of citizens... will be reproduced in an increasingly divided and publicly unaccountable privatized world? (2006, p. 115)” The construction of community participation as passive consumption is linked to a decline in social interaction and overall community participation (Putnam, 2000; Schor, 1999). As changes to policy must be transformed through collective organization rather than individual action, this has serious implications for the realization of rights (Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2009). Harvey (2006) explains, “Once the city is imaged by capital solely as spectacle, it can then only be consumed passively, rather than actively reacted by the populace at large through political participation” (p. 23). Hacker and Pierson (2010) note that middle class and union organizing has declined over time, while the organizing power of corporations (and corporate spending on political campaigns) has grown dramatically.

Research suggests that the role of private influence on the political process has contributed to political disengagement by eroding trust in government and breaking the connection between people and policy (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). The U.S. has one of the lowest voter turnouts in all democratic countries (Desilver, 2015). Furthermore, it has the highest class bias in voter turnout, meaning that voter turnout and registration rates increase dramatically with income and education level. The vast majority (80%) of those making over \$150,000/year voted in 2012, whereas less than half (47%) of those making <\$10,000/year voted (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This gap has increased since the 1980s (Leighley & Nagler, 2007). Research shows that on average, nonvoters are more liberal, favor stronger unions, favor more government funding on healthcare and public schools, and support more affordable housing (Leighley & Nagler, 2013). Unequal voter turnout creates anti-redistribution bias and results in policies that reflect the interests of wealthy voters (Gilens, 2012), serving to maintain the status quo and reproduce economic inequality.

Critical Placemaking as a Tool for Resisting the Privatization of Public Space

In sum, the privatization of public space associated with neoliberalism creates physical and discursive barriers to economic mobility, community bridging, and political participation. When marginalized community members are denied access to shared spaces and common resources, when alternative histories and perspectives are excluded from the community narrative, and when poor and low-

income people are seen as the passive objects of policy rather than active partners, democracy cannot thrive.

At the heart of critical placemaking is the assertion that the knowledge, experiences, and contributions of everyday people matter, and that it is vital to create and preserve everyday spaces of common ground where pluralism and democracy can thrive (Reed, 1996). Placemaking can work as a tool for resisting processes of privatization and rewriting the community narrative, shifting the individualistic, consumer subjectivity of neoliberalism to a more interconnected understanding of self and society- one that acknowledges the link between individuals and social structures. By cultivating a sense of place identity and attachment, building bridges among community members through dialogue and collaboration, and creating places that expand the community’s capacity to act and access resources, critical placemaking can act as a pathway for empowerment.

There are many ways in which marginalized communities can use placemaking as a tool for reclaiming public space. Community gardens, murals, encampments, tenant-owned cooperatives, protests, demonstrations, and the promotion of community land trusts are just some of the ways in which community members have come together to voice their stories, exercise resistance to exclusion, and envision alternatives to privatization. The Alley Project (TAP), based in Detroit, is one example of the everyday use of public space to engender a sense of positive identity and community participation (Michigan Municipal League, 2013). In a city that struggles with depopulation, high unemployment, abandoned buildings, and racial segregation, TAP began by transforming several empty lots in the southwest region of the city into safe, creative spaces for neighbors to meet, grow food, and collaboratively create street art. The space has become a lively point of convergence, bridging neighbors of diverse ages and ethnicities and strengthening its sense of community identity and history.

Future Directions for Empirical Work

Throughout this analysis, I have drawn from key concepts in environmental psychology, narrative psychology, and community psychology in order to theorize the process of what I have termed “critical placemaking.” This synthesis provides fertile new ground for empirical research.

Empirically Assessing Placemaking Processes

One line of future research pertains to quantitatively examining how aspects of the placemaking process are linked to psychosocial processes and targeted outcomes,

such as social capital and civic engagement. Surveys using existing measures of empowerment (see Speer & Peterson, 2000), critical consciousness (see Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2014), place attachment and place identity (see Lewicka, 2011), sense of community (see Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008), social capital (see Onyx & Bullen, 2000), and civic engagement (see Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2014), could be administered with community members involved in critical placemaking initiatives to explore the relationships between these variables in a process model. In addition, analyses linking these processes to specific aspects of placemaking, such as setting characteristics, interpersonal interactions, and exposure to counter-narratives could further elucidate the factors and pathways that help to build more inclusive, participatory public spaces. This line of research would lend empirical support to the conceptual pathways proposed in this theoretical framework, and would expand on Maton's (2008) efforts to explore the psychological mediators through which community settings facilitate empowerment.

These assessments would have important practical implications in evaluating and strengthening the positive effects of placemaking for individuals and communities, as well as identifying potential barriers. One practical outcome may be the creation of evaluation rubrics to examine what specific environmental and social features of placemaking support targeted outcomes such as social bridging and democratic participation. The ability to identify and measure tangible indicators of placemaking would help community organizers and public institutions seeking to increase social cohesion and access to resources, such as community centers and museums, evaluate their progress and advocate for funding.

Mapping Inequality

More research needs to be conducted integrating spatial and social psychological data (Luke, 2005). Identity, behavior, and relationships are all highly dependent upon environmental, cultural, and historical context. Yet findings in psychological studies are too often presented as placeless, timeless, and culture-less, contributing to the reduction in variability (Shinn & Toohey, 2003; Trickett, 1996). Given the rise of socioeconomic inequality and segregation, capturing this variability is all the more vital. Thus, a second line of empirical research involves a critical evaluation of local public places and mapping the social and spatial dimensions of inequality, focused on who can access public places, whose histories are told, and what kinds of behaviors and interactions are afforded.

Mapping inclusivity and access to important public places and resources (e.g., parks, health centers) along lines of social class and race using ethnographic methods

could provide a useful starting point for answering these questions. For example, observations could focus on what social groups use a given place, what resources and activities are afforded by the physical environment (such as benches, water fountains, public restrooms, bicycling lanes, etc.), what kinds of gatekeeping mechanisms exist (such as cost of entry or the necessity of purchasing products or services in adjacent shops), how the place is regulated formally and informally (through the presence of gates, signage, police, private security, ordinances, and/or social norms), what kinds of social interactions occur between people, and what roles and level of participation and ownership is afforded (passive or active). Ethnographic observations of signs and symbolic features of the public landscape (such as monuments, plaques, and public art) can help to reveal whose stories are represented and whose interests are served.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is a context-sensitive tool that allows for visualizing and analyzing the spatial dimensions of social psychological phenomena (Luke, 2005). Participatory GIS methods can allow for community members to access important information about their environments relevant to their mobility and life chances, such as spatial segregation by race and income, the location of public services, police stops and arrests, and pollution levels. Such methodologies can work to raise critical consciousness about the environment, locate and visualize barriers to resources, and are effective as a tool for communicating with policy makers (Cravey, Arcury, & Quandt, 2000).

In addition, conducting multidimensional scaling analyses could reveal dimensions and themes underlying the cognitive organization of places (see Langhout, 2003). Asking participants to rate specific public places in terms of inclusivity, safety, sociability, diversity, agency, beauty, cleanliness, and control, and to indicate their preference for each place, could provide an understanding of how different community stakeholders organize meanings of place, and if patterns of differences emerge between social groups.

Exploring the Lived Experiences and Resistance Strategies of Marginalized Community Members

A third line of research stemming from this theoretical framework involves exploring the lived experiences of marginalized community members to understand the ways in which privatization and displacement are experienced and resisted through everyday acts of placemaking that work to reclaim agency and belonging in public space. What do such efforts look like, what do they mean for participants, and how do they change personal and community narratives? In-depth narrative interviews with

community members experiencing disinvestment or displacement could help to shed light on the meaning that individuals make of their personal identities in dialogue with the stories told about the places in which they live and work (e.g., Hodgetts et al., 2008). Participatory action research, such as Photovoice methodology, also holds promise in working with disinvested communities to identify problems and assets, consider dominant representations of the community, share underrepresented histories and perspectives, and collaborate on solutions (Fernández & Langhout, 2014; Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, & Foster-Fishman, 2006; Sonn, Quayle, & Kasat, 2015). Equally important, such research could result in exemplary case studies that highlight community successes. Work amplifying stories of marginalization, displacement, and resistance could be particularly valuable for research conducted in partnership with American Indian peoples (Preucel & Matero, 2008; Wendt & Gone, 2012), refugees (Sampson & Gifford, 2010), individuals without housing (Townley, Pearson, Lehrwyn, Prophet, & Trauernicht, 2016), and communities of color and low-income communities living in gentrifying areas (e.g., Anti-eviction mapping project, 2016).

Conclusion

As economic inequality and segregation continue to grow in the U.S., psychology has an important role to play in exploring and promoting processes that can disrupt social injustice. This paper identifies the privatization of public space as a social problem that contributes to social, economic, and racial inequality, and advances a theoretical framework for “critical placemaking” as a way of reclaiming public space for public use, synthesizing key concepts from environmental, narrative, and community psychology. Throughout this paper, I have focused on three questions: Who can access and participate in public places? Whose stories and histories are told in public places? And finally, what kinds of interactions and behaviors are afforded by public places?

First, this paper considers who can access and participate in public places. Research suggests that the privatization of public space increases exclusion and segregation, diminishing the life chances and economic mobility of poor and low-income people. Far from being static or inconsequential, public places are revealed to be active sites of social reproduction and resistance (Sutton & Kemp, 2011). Research in environmental psychology demonstrates that place informs who we are (Low & Altman, 1992; Proshansky et al., 1983), how we act (Barker, 1968), and what we think is possible, and that the way in which place is structured has important

implications for social (in)equality (Saegert, 2014). As such, it is imperative to consider the role of placemaking in catalyzing change. Sutton and Kemp (2011) affirm this point, stating, “Bringing place into consciousness and realizing that everyone has the potential to be makers of places changes not only the place but the people as well” (p. xiii).

Second, this paper addresses whose stories and histories are told in public places. Using a narrative lens, the proposed framework illustrates how inclusion and participation in public places are communicated through material and symbolic features of the physical environment and co-constructed through dialogue in everyday social interactions (Hammack, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Whereas the privatization of public space is legitimated by a master narrative of fear, feeding classist stereotypes that reduce interactions between social classes and increase social alienation, critical placemaking is theorized as a way to make space for a plurality of voices and histories and create a more inclusive community narrative.

Lastly, the present analysis attends to what kinds of interactions and behaviors are afforded by public places. The depoliticization of public space has serious implications for democracy, further consolidating power and capital in the hands of a wealthy owning class, who have been shown to have an undue influence on the political process (Page, Bartels, & Seawright, 2013). Drawing from community psychology, I argue that critical placemaking can facilitate conscientization (Freire, 2005) and empowerment (Rappaport, 1987) by reimagining and transforming our relationship with place, our relationships to other community members, and our understanding of what actions are possible. Through these mechanisms, critical placemaking can work to transform public places into more inclusive and democratic settings of everyday learning and critical pedagogy, planting the seeds for social change.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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