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Article

Living in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods: Experiential Narratives of Residents Facing Daily, Economic, Environmental, and Social Challenges

Anne-Laure Legendre *, Benjamin Combes and Yorghos Remvikos *

CEARC, UVSQ, University of Paris Saclay, 91190 Gif-sur-Yvette, France; bcombes@ateliersdurables.com

* Correspondence: anne-laure.legendre@uvsq.fr (A.-L.L.); yorghos.remvikos@uvsq.fr (Y.R.);

Tel.: +33-695-5631-71 (A.-L.L.)

Abstract: Being both a driver and a manifestation of the current ecological, climate, and social crises, urban sustainability has become a major contemporary issue. Rather than framing the challenges that populations are confronted to as external factors, especially in deprived and segregated neighborhoods, we collected narratives about their experience of their living environments. Our work assumed an innovative interdisciplinary perspective in response to the complex interconnexions of the issues at stake. We aimed to highlight the significance of a situated perspective and an experience-based approach to fully embrace the idea of a research engaged with and for the communities, especially those suffering from marginalization and social deprivation. Our empirical results, rooted in expressions of place attachment (or not), in four disadvantaged neighborhoods in France, are presented in the form of a heuristic device, a non-normative framework that iteratively produced a representation with six dimensions that we called feelings. Together, they can be used to explore the manifestations of well-being, through place attachment related to one's living environment, in a relational and open way, as people make sense of their place and possibly engage in its defense. We suggest further attention should be directed to concepts such as agency, freedom, and social recognition, as major conditions of the possibility of well-being or leading a good life. These dimensions could be major targets for policies trying to respond to the current sustainability challenges, such as social and environmental justice in the face of an unequal and changing world.

Keywords: well-being; urban planning; place attachment; experience of inhabitation; social deprivation; sustainability



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1. Introduction

The value we place on life and how we define what a good life is are topics that have preoccupied philosophical thought since ancient times. The concept of “well-being” is present in very diverse examples of contemporary literature, from philosophy to economy and psychology, as well as in the recent debates around ecological and climate upheavals. “Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages” is one of the United Nations sustainable development goals. Viewing the ecological and climate crises as inextricably tied to our way of living in this planet [1] surely raises profound questions about the sense we attribute to our human existence [2] or what is important and for whom. This can refigure the way we look at sustainability to embrace the question of well-being and its possible meanings.

1.1. First Encounter with the Problem: Health as Complete Well-Being

We first encountered the idea of well-being through environmental health issues. Thus, it became progressively central in our work. Sustainability was another fundamental concept, as we cannot conceive sustainable policies that are blind to public health issues. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 24 percent of the overall global burden of disease is attributable to modifiable environmental factors [3]. But what do we mean by health? By defining health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”, the WHO [4] provides not only an alternative to healthcare as the simple management of diseases but also opens new debates on the concept of well-being itself. However, this definition leaves us at a crossroads, with new conceptual ambiguities [5,6]. On the one hand, we may be tempted to consider health as complete well-being, even though this holistic account may not be straightforward [7]. But, do we have specific ways to understand the concept of well-being, originally a philosophical and not a naturalistic one? Yet, the expression “health as a complete well-being” is presented at the forefront of most public health policies, while less attention has been paid to the ethical and epistemological implications of this shift. Despite the numerous appeals to update approaches and change the paradigm, most medical research still focuses on disease rather than health [8], and the prevailing public health strategies are targeting the unhealthy behaviors of individuals [9]. Acknowledging these shortcomings or maybe contradictions, how do we attribute meaning to well-being in the context of challenging health, social, and environmental situations? Is it relevant for the study of sustainability?

1.2. Rising Concerns on Urban Settings and Their Relation with Health and Well-Being

We chose to focus on living environments that have long been recognized as major determinants of health [10,11]. However, do environmental assessments cover intangible aspects of quality of life [12]? In the face of the multiple and deeply rooted problems of environmental degradation, significant efforts have been made in the past two decades to integrate health concerns into urban policies and planning, notably through the WHO Healthy Cities program [13] or healthy urban planning initiatives [14]. In such initiatives, good health or well-being seem to be used almost interchangeably [15] (e.g., p. 8 or p. 90) [16]. In a guide entitled *City of Well-being*, Hugh Barton [17] insists on putting people back at the heart of urban planning suggesting that well-being in relation with one’s place cannot be defined without considering the perspective of residents. He also encourages urban planning to target what he calls mental and social well-being. Nonetheless, no further insights are provided on what differentiates well-being from health as the absence of disease or incapacity. The concept of complete well-being in relation to one’s living places needs further investigation, raising new questions and putting different disciplines in dialogue.

1.3. A Eudemonic Perspective on Well-Being as More than Happiness

It is not our intention to provide a full historical and multidisciplinary review of the concept of well-being nor to extensively describe the diversity of ways to study it. But we may share some salient ideas that have shaped the problem as we understand it. One starting point could be the theories of Amartya Sen, who noted that well-being was often reduced to “being well-off, financially or materially; in other words, to well-having or having much” [18]. His capability approach globally contributed to reorient economic considerations to better include what people value [19] and how they have access to the possibilities to be and to do what is important to them, a vision inextricable from the notion of liberty (We retained Amartya Sen’s term, liberty; however, in the rest of the text, we chose to use freedom) [20]. In a similar way, we may include the Aristotelian idea of a good

life, coined as eudemonic, actively pursued in accordance with one's values, in contrast to a hedonistic one, more passive or based on utility [21]. Working with ambiguous concepts can result in defining one abstraction with another, leading to circularity. Our research, guided by a eudemonic perspective, is an attempt to investigate its expressions in real-life situations in relation to the places where people live.

1.4. Our Central Hypothesis: Investigating Well-Being Through Its Manifestations and the Expressions of Place Attachment

In this research, we defend a relational approach to places, exploring the multiple ties that are perpetually being formed and dissolved in the act of inhabiting, further detailed in the next section. Underlining the millennial debates on the polysemy of the terms spaces and places, and in the wake of many philosophers, urban planners [22], or architects [23], we conceive places as being about bonds and meanings, not simply a natural environment or an external scenery of our social lives.

Consequently, we confronted the possibility of identifying and recognizing well-being as stated in the experiences of inhabiting. Hypothesizing that well-being, as a philosophical abstraction, cannot be grasped as an object and measured directly, we turned to the concept of place attachment within the vast field of environmental psychology, as a possible inspiration to investigate manifestations of situated well-being. Place attachment is a multidimensional concept that refers to the meanings people attribute to a place and how they relate to it [24]. Its expression may vary, including a desire not to leave, a motivation to invest in local life, or a commitment to improving one's living conditions [25]. Korpela et al. have shown that place attachment is like an "emotional bond" as people may claim "I would miss this place if I moved somewhere else" [26]. Similar insights can be found in Brown and Perkins measuring place attachment based on unhappiness associated with moving [27]. The concept applies at both the individual and group levels and has been proposed as a good way to explore what constitutes a community within a territory [28]. Expressions of strong place attachment can also exist in neighborhoods that may seem degraded or stigmatized [29,30]. Using the lens of place attachment, we opted for a subjectivist/reflexive/critical design [31] centered on the narrated experiences of the inhabitants of disadvantaged neighborhoods.

1.5. Consolidating Arguments Around Situated and Experience-Oriented Approaches to Places

An important humanist turn in the field of geography occurred in the 1970s, when place began to be seen from a phenomenological perspective and research would "not simply be about the world or about people but about people-in-the-world" [32]. The separation between Nature and Culture has had profound consequences, including in the way we conceive the relation between urban planning and well-being. Several authors support the idea that the meaning of a place comes from the experience we have of it [33,34], and that we should reconsider the methods of observing urban dynamics based on the feelings of residents [35], including the inseparable intangible or symbolic dimensions [36]. It is then no longer a matter of studying how different characteristics of a given urban place can influence different parameters, such as health, well-being, or resilience (linear causality). The latter perspective can "run the risk of reifying or fetishizing the social connections which are simultaneously the product, the expression and a vector of reproduction of the neighborhood" [37]. It demands that we consider inhabitation as more-than-dwelling [38] and as an anthropological fact [39] (p. 9). In the 1970s, the geographer Armand Frémont introduced the concept of lived space (*espace vécu* in French) and opened the way to a phenomenological approach to territories and to the geography of perception [40]. For Seamon, places are "spatial-temporal fields that integrate, activate, and interconnect things, people, experiences, meanings and events" [41] (p. 29). For the Japanese geographer

Yi Fu-Tuan, the experience of inhabitation should not be considered through the lens of acquired capacities but as an experiment that is continuously renewed [42].

In a guide on the assessment of well-being in a territory, the geographer Lise Bourdeau-Lepage highlighted its diverse definitions and suggested cross-referencing objective and subjective dimensions with a preference for contextualized approaches [43]. Several open aspects were proposed, such as people's experience of inhabiting, their freedom of choice, and the opportunities found in the living environment. However, those dimensions were not based on empirical research of residents' experience of living in specific contexts, but rather assessed using predefined indicators. We preferred a different epistemic stance: instead of assuming that we can identify from external observations the dimensions of a living place that could be favorable to well-being, we propose to study it as it is formed in people's experience of inhabiting a given place, from their perspective.

1.6. Aims, Scope, and Organization of This Article

In a previous article [44], we showed that adopting an experience based-approach in order to understand territories and their problems provides a different picture compared to more positivist expert-based ones. In the specific context of disadvantaged neighborhoods in France facing pressing situations (environmental, social, health-related, political, cultural, . . .), we surprisingly collected positive appreciations about the neighborhood and the wish to live a good life despite recurring feelings of relegation, exclusion, or stigmatization. In the present article, we want to delve deeper into the data we collected on the experiences of inhabiting in objectively challenging contexts, which is being part of the nationally defined areas targeted for priority urban interventions. We want to share the different dimensions of place attachment that we discovered in people's experience of inhabiting, and how this can help future research on well-being, including whether it is relevant for studies on sustainability.

The following part of the article presents our methodology, involving an ethnographic approach for generating the data and the grounded theory to interpret them. Data collection was conducted within broader processes of local policy assessments, involving multiple stakeholders. Since the orientation of our work was both sociological and political, we relied on the French sociologist Luc Boltanski's sociology of emancipation [45]. We applied his framing of local situations (inseparably, physical, symbolic, social, cultural, and political), where people encounter challenges, formulate their judgments or justifications, and may contest, from experience, institutional "truths". In Section 3, we present the main findings of the inquiries we conducted on the experience of inhabiting. First, we present the notion of named "feelings" to represent the multidimensional aspect of the experience of inhabiting and, secondly, we present what we call a heuristic device, which serves both to represent and iteratively refine those feelings. While exposing the logic, the multiple dimensions, and the overall dynamics of this system, as a comprehensive vocabulary, we depict possible avenues to explore well-being related to places. In the conclusion, we provide insights on the possible implications of this work for policymaking, the new questions it opens, and some limitations of our work.

2. Methodology

2.1. A Research Focusing on Disadvantaged Neighborhoods in France: What Is at Stake?

There is a long history of public policies targeting those areas coined as priority neighborhoods (Our fieldwork was performed in underprivileged neighborhoods defined by national policies based on degradation and the concentration of poverty, in short, of deprivation. In the French government's nomenclature, they are called *quartiers prioritaires* [priority neighborhoods] and are the object of many programs and interventions. Elsewhere,

we refer to them by the terms disadvantaged or deprived neighborhoods.) in the French political and administrative terminology, with evolving representations of the issues and the strategies that should be developed to address them. The effects that those policies have had on residents and their quality of life are highly controversial. Thus, the renovation programs conducted under this scheme have received major criticisms, especially regarding the underlying hypothesis of resolving social problems through changes in urban design, while little attention and recognition has been paid to residents as the assets and strengths of those neighborhoods [46].

The four neighborhoods included in our research fall within this national policy of urban renovation. They were proposed by our local research partners in municipalities. All urban areas presented relatively degraded conditions of living (e.g., overcrowding, unhealthy and sometimes insecure dwellings, etc.), different environmental challenges (e.g., pollution and lack of environmental and social amenities), together with raising social concerns (e.g., aging population, social isolation, poverty, unemployment, lack of perspective for younger people, lower education level, etc.), not to mention health issues (an additional burden of chronic diseases and frequent mental illness). We may also add that the most vulnerable populations are generally captive of these neighborhoods, and it is widely acknowledged that these are the result of multiple policies that have led to a phenomenon of socio-spatial segregation and relegation [47]. Those cumulative issues and their quite depressing overview must not hide the existence of a multiplicity of local initiatives striving to transform each territory.

Fieldwork was carried out by two PhD students between 2013 and 2017 in four disadvantaged urban areas in France, in the Paris region and on the outskirts of La Rochelle. It was completed by post-doctoral research between 2018 and 2021, in La Rochelle, with a framework overlapping with the previous fields, albeit with a different (vulnerable) public.

2.2. A Study of the Experience of Inhabiting Nested in the Broader Research on Local Public Policies

Access to our test sites followed requests of municipalities, concerning ongoing or near-future urban renovation projects of degraded neighborhoods. In Nanterre (2014) and La Rochelle (2016–2017), the inquiry was part of a process of health impact assessments (HIAs) conducted on large-scale development and urban renovation projects, each of them presenting major questions of sustainability, health, poverty, and quality of life. Between 2018 and 2021, the directors of the social services of the city of La Rochelle requested another experiment of policy assessment, this time on a new social subsidy program, concerning the most fragile of residents. It run from 2018 to 2021, and data were used in our study.

2.3. Detailed Methodology of an Ethnographic Inquiry

The idea of place attachment has generated a large body of literature, following different ontological and epistemic perspectives, leading to specific methodological choices. Among the qualitative inquiries, Manzo and Pinto de Carvalho note that “a researcher might conduct in-depth interviews but still seek to approximate objectivity in the classic positivist sense by seeking to quantify the textual data or make generalizable claims” [31] (p. 111). Thus, they distinguish two paradigms, positivist approaches contrasted to subjectivist/critically reflexive ones, with our own work corresponding to the latter.

The fieldwork extended over long periods of observant participation, following ethnographic requirements [48]. We wished to come as close as possible to the way people live and represent their life in their everyday surroundings. Regular immersion in the neighborhoods was performed in the sense of rendering familiar the figure of the researcher, including by participating and organizing events, in collaboration with municipalities, community centers, and local associations. The goal was to understand places from the

residents' perspective and their own context of meaning; Malinowski mentioned in [49] what it means to inhabit this neighborhood and what is important for the residents, or conversely, what constitutes an obstacle.

Face-to-face interviews, which are the focus of the current article, were not just a method of data collection. To allow our subjects to speak freely, it was necessary to build trust, as noted in Soyini Madison's critical ethnography [50]. Furthermore, as we sought to uncover their experience of domination, all power or status asymmetries were to be avoided, such as in the case of experts facing lay people. Manzo et al. posit that, to let "non-hegemonic perspectives of place to be heard", the inquiry needs to open to subjectivity and reflexivity and "allow people to describe their diverse experiences of place in their own terms/images" [31] (p. 119). Our position, alternating empathy and reflexivity, was that of a peer, since the experts in the matter of local life experience were the residents and their engagement was a guarantee of the richness of the exchanges. We followed what resembled a conversation canvas [51], with open questions, devoid of any normativity, possibly leading to the interviewees having the impression of being judged, according to the answers provided. Conversation was elicited through cues such as: "Do you remember your impressions when you first arrived in the neighborhood?", opening a discussion about the circumstances of their arrival, sometimes a more complete account of their residential journey. Furthermore, their aspirations were often brought back, with subsequent satisfactions and disappointments. Other questions were about their residential intentions and the way they would talk about their neighborhood to a friend unfamiliar with it.

Residents were recruited door to door or in public spaces, taking care to diversify the days and timing. We presented ourselves as agents working for the municipality (La Rochelle and Nanterre) or students from the University (the other two sites), and thoroughly explained the objectives of the research, insisting on the importance of their experiential expertise for its success. Permission was obtained to record the interviews, identified by codes for the purpose of anonymity. We left invitations for a public presentation of the results that we planned before starting the interviews. We shared with participants the context and scope of the research, without making promises.

The ethical recommendations for research with humans applicable in our university were respected. At the time, we asked that the formal requirement of informed consent could countervail our will to install a trusting and more horizontal relation with the subjects of our inquiry. Accordingly, we defined the basic ethical conditions for all encounters. During the conversations, we paid attention to their stories, with an attitude of empathy and care for what people accepted to share. Eventually, we scrupulously ensured that the analysis respected the spirit of the residents' comments and the specific context within which they were expressed. The overall intention was to make *their* experiences heard within the processes of urban planning.

2.4. Interpretation of Results Following the Principles of Grounded Theory

The recordings were entirely transcribed and submitted to a thematization following grounded theory [52], which assumes that theory emerges from the collected data in its constructivist version (see also [53]). Despite the heterogeneity of territories and issues, the common question of the relationship with the living environment and the experience of inhabiting allowed us to cross-check the data and pool 200 interviews from 5 processes of research and 4 different neighborhoods (In Trappes, the neighborhood of Jean Macé (2013), N = 22; Nanterre, the neighborhoods of Provinces Françaises and Anatole France (2014), N = 52; Les Mureaux, the neighborhoods of Musiciens and Vigne Blanche (2015) = 48; La Rochelle, the neighborhood of Villeneuve-les-Salines (2016), N = 54; La Rochelle, study on a

social program including residents from Villeneuve-les-Salines (2019), N = 24). The textual corpus was submitted to a first-level interpretation, labelling selected fragments freely and, then, treating obvious redundancies.

The purpose of the additional step was to produce a parsimonious set of second-level classes, potentially interconnected and allowing for some overlap, while covering as widely as possible the residents' accounts. For this, we followed an iterative heuristic rather than the description or application of current theories [53]. Thus, a sense can be provided to well-being in relation with one's place, starting from the "labeled" accounts of residents, assessing the literature to open and refine concepts and ideas encountered along the way, and then returning to the data to improve the understanding of the results whenever necessary. We examined the data about the experience of inhabiting and sought regularities and convergences all relating to the expression of place attachment, that we used as a sensitizing concept [53] while trying to minimize our own interpretations.

3. Results–Discussion

Our findings are organized in two sections: first, we justify the notion of "feelings" that would best represent the multidimensional sense of inhabiting; secondly, we describe the heuristic device, followed by a detailed presentation of the six different, but not independent feelings. We also discuss, throughout, the epistemological and ethical aspects of our results, and include connections with the literature.

3.1. *Feelings, a Way of Approaching the Relationship with the Living Place*

3.1.1. Inhabiting, a Total Experience?

Introducing the notion of "total social fact", Marcel Mauss had an intention: not to bring together a collection of distinctive things, but to move away from fixed descriptive logics in an attempt to understand the social world through the dynamic network of relationships between all aspects of reality [54]. In the accounts about the experience of inhabiting and the relationship with the living place, we were struck by the fact that this experience is never a collection of fragmented elements that can be described rationally. Instead, in the collected narratives, inhabiting appeared as an overall experience made up, "at once and simultaneously" (Mauss's own expression), of a set of dimensions that together constitute living. The very diverse experiences of the neighborhood had affective, cognitive, and relational aspects [55], but also temporal and spatial, aesthetic and symbolic dimensions.

Although it could be tempting to break down the constituent dimensions of a place to facilitate sectoral approaches to territorial management, we avoided projecting categories that may not correspond to the experience of those living in the territory. This total experience was the first to attract our attention: it is this "experience as-a-whole" that we tried to understand, acknowledging that this whole may not be just the sum of its parts, which may not appear exhaustively in the residents' accounts. In *Man and the Earth*, the geographer Elisée Reclus insisted on the importance of studying the living environment as a whole: "While it is certainly important to study separately and in detail how a particular element of the environment impacts on it [. . .], it is by an effort of pure abstraction that we strive to present this particular feature of the environment as if it existed independently, and that we seek to isolate it from all the others to study its essential influence" (quoted in [56]). The "whole" to which we refer is an abstraction, not a "thing" that can be grasped unequivocally. It requires a considerable epistemological effort of taking off the objectivist glasses of the observer in order to penetrate the residents' experience in its diversity.

3.1.2. Grasping the Sense of Inhabiting Through Expressions of Feelings

Without giving in to the illusion that generality can be derived from particular situations [57], we grant recognition to each life story while, at the same time, seeking to identify the commonalities and disparities between the multiple unique experiences collected in different territories. We have shown that inhabiting is a total experience, but we also suggest that the way people talk about their relation to their neighborhood involves, as previously mentioned, cognitive, relational, and affective dimensions as well as a multi-sensory and symbolic appraisal of the place. After all, it is through our body and our senses that we experience the world and, thanks to our emotions, we can relate, identify with the place, act within it, and influence or benefit from it [58]. Many authors agree on the affective/emotional nature of this construct [26,59]. We identified and classified textual fragments that were infused with emotions (affective statements), which we proposed to call “feelings”, whether they be positive or negative. However, in our analysis, it was not the emotions that we tried to pinpoint, but judgments, arguments, and justifications relating to events, actions, or reactions. Take the example of an interview with a 52-year-old woman who lives in La Rochelle in a small house built between the 1960s and 1970s on a drained part of a former salt marsh. Moving from a description of what the neighborhood is composed of, the following quotation illustrates the act of inhabiting as a total experience and the multi-faceted statements about it, mixing observations, memories, values, and emotions that are, altogether, best expressed as feelings:

“There are the blocks of apartments between the houses and the marshes, it makes me feel that the neighborhood is turning its back on the lakes. It should be turned the other way, so that we all face south and life is opened out onto the marshes. When my son was younger, we used to go there, even in winter when it snowed, but there aren’t many people anymore. And yet it’s so pretty and pleasant, wild, natural, it’s beyond me that more people than that don’t go there.” 52-year-old woman, living a detached house in La Rochelle.

Feelings could open a very different way to envision territories and sustainability challenges. They offer an alternative to a conception of nature as separated from culture and nature as a context for social life, an alternative to a conception of inhabitants as users of a space, or inhabitation as a set of functions and needs. In his work exploring the concept of living, Didier Fassin seeks to reconcile naturalist and humanist perspectives in a way that resonates with our observations. Following the work of the philosopher G. Canguilhem, he insists that, beyond natural life processes, or whatever belongs to biology, life stories may capture the biographical dimension, both being in a constant dialog, throughout existence [60] (e.g., p. 35).

3.2. Understanding the Nature of Relationship to One’s Living Place Through a Heuristic Device

As previously stated, our underlying hypothesis was that there might be no well-being whatsoever without some kind of attachment to one’s living place, along a journey paved with numerous challenges. In the corpus of narratives that we collected, we spotted regularities that, progressively, allowed us to group and label different types of feelings, each and every one of them expressing something of place attachment. Altogether, the feelings form a nuanced dynamic system, with no definitive borders and potentially interconnected, somewhat overlapping contents, leading us to try and express their particularity through a characteristic statement for each. The six labels of feelings were organized in two groups. The first includes: feelings of familiarity, integration, ease, and fulfillment, which are experienced in a direct way. Two other feelings, those of unfairness and or of having control over one’s life and situation, were indirect since they imply reflexivity on one’s situation.

3.2.1. Place Attachment Represented in the Form of a Flower

We chose the flower with its root system and petals as a metaphor of the idea of place attachment (Figure 1), one dynamically rooted in context, and that blossoms or withers through the experience of inhabitation. Because place attachment is a complex notion, we opted for a heuristic device to allow for a limited number of permeable contours rather than well-demarcated categories. Any statement may receive more than one label represented by the petals of the flower, all of them being submitted to mutual influences.

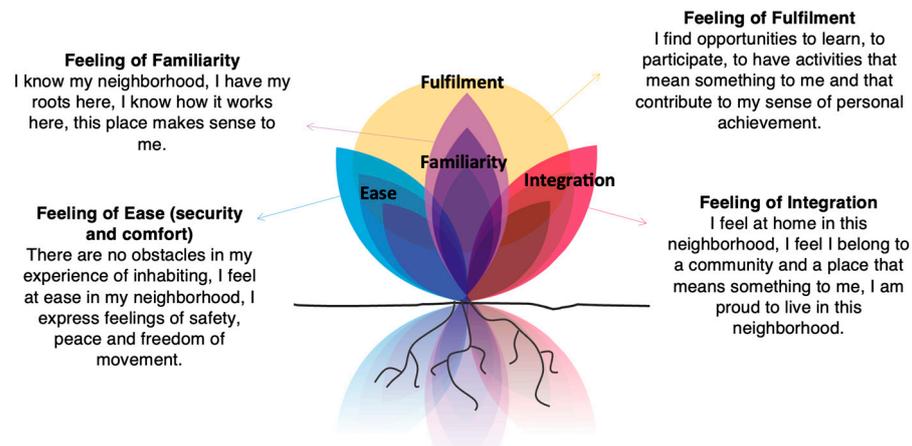


Figure 1. Heuristic device of place attachment and four categories of feelings.

Obviously, residents have also reported negative experiences. In that case, critical comments still can be associated with the same categories of feelings, but in a negative, degraded, altered, atrophied, or distorted way. We tried to represent this notion as a withered flower (Figure 2), expressing a more problematic relationship with one's living place. Positive or negative tonalities were expressed as a scale of the power of inhabiting: when negative experiences were mentioned, people also highlighted a lack of agency (In the French sociological or philosophical literature, the term power-to-act is preferred to that of agency, which may encompass other connotations, beyond the scope of this article, where we chose to use agency throughout), powerlessness. Alternatively, they may feel forced to act in a certain way, contrary to what matters for them (a symbolic violence). In the following part, we describe the different types of feelings, both in their positive or negative forms using examples.

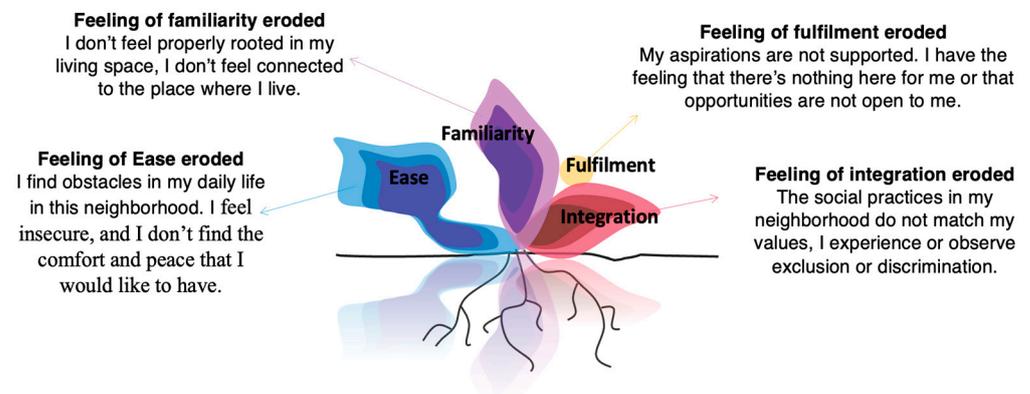


Figure 2. Heuristic device of place attachment. Feelings in an eroded configuration.

3.2.2. The Feelings of Familiarity, Ease, Integration, and Fulfilment

- The feeling of familiarity corresponds to the way a person understands their living environment through various significant markers in the neighborhood. It relates to

the following ideas: *“I know my neighborhood, I have my roots here, I know how this place works, it makes sense to me.”*

On the positive side, the feeling of familiarity may be the mention of a physical or tangible aspect of the living environment (*“easy access to the station”*) or an emotional response that indicates a positive impression (*“the sense of calm”, “the noise of the ice cream truck that conveys the spirit of the countryside”*). It is related to the idea of knowing the neighborhood, having a clear understanding of the local uses and practices to the extent that one masters what happens there.

“All my activities, whether shopping, going to the doctor, dentist, pharmacy, gym, yoga, I can do everything on foot here. So, this neighborhood is great [...] and we are close to the city center while being in a super quiet neighborhood, there is no noise, no traffic.” 62-year-old woman La Rochelle, owner of a detached house in the residential sector.

When a living place does not provide any meaningful anchoring element, the feeling of familiarity is eroded. It can be expressed as feelings of being overwhelmed or of not being connected to the neighborhood. Sometimes, points of reference are altered, and what used to be familiar becomes redundant, strange, or alienating. For example, when changes (urban or social) occur, expressions such as *“we no longer recognize the neighborhood”* may be mentioned. The feeling of familiarity then becomes one of confinement, and familiar markers turn into causes of withdrawal or traps (*“having the feeling of living in a closed circle”*). In the following example, we are in Nanterre, an area of intense urban interventions. The experience of this woman shows how familiarity can evolve to feelings of confinement because of the spatial configuration of the buildings, creating a massive wall around the historical urban settlement. It is also related to an impression of her life being under the judgmental gaze of the neighborhood.

“It’s an enclosed neighborhood in a world that’s always moving. I want to push the walls outwards... There are some disadvantages living here like in all villages. I feel a type of social pressure. Your behavior and reactions are judged. When you come back with your shopping, everyone knows where you’ve been... You have a new car, people wonder how you got it.” 47-year-old woman in Nanterre, living in social housing (collective accommodation).

- The feeling of integration is linked to the way the person represents their place within the neighborhood. This label is best understood through our focus on power relations as we detected narratives expressing feelings of being part of the neighborhood or to the contrary, experiences of domination, exclusion, or discrimination. It relates to the following ideas: *“I feel at home in this neighborhood, I feel I belong to a community and a place that I am part of, I am proud to live in this neighborhood”*.

On the positive side, integration refers to the idea of *“finding your place”*, which implies being able to remain true to yourself in your living place. We noted comments on the quality of neighborly relations, which can range from a simple *“hello”* to solidarity in the face of adversity (*“we support each other”*). When there is a feeling of alignment with the values and life of the place, expressions of pride of living in the neighborhood may arise.

“Yes, we know people, we’ll meet up after work, easily. What’s great here is that we’re all in the same difficult situation but we support each other, when we need something, we help out...” 49-year-old man in La Rochelle, living in social housing (collective accommodation)

The feeling of integration is eroded when a person has the impression of not belonging to the neighborhood, when the observed social practices no longer correspond to the

person's expectations and values expressed more or less explicitly ("respect for others is important for me", "some people lack decency"). It is also linked to the notion of inclusiveness, which is difficult to describe in the positive sense, but can be clearly implied in situations of exclusion or discrimination. We perceive an eroded power to act when references are made to a form of disempowerment in the face of a malfunction of the neighborhood, or when certain practices cause a form of exclusion, or when there is forced or chosen distancing ("it doesn't make you want to get to know them"). Situations of marginalization, relegation, or self-exclusion can also be expressed.

"There are 40 apartments in the building, and I say hello to 6 people maximum. . . Besides, it's more foreigners who are older than me who say hello. Most French people don't say hello!" 47-year-old man in La Rochelle, living in social housing (collective accommodation)

- The feeling of ease has physical, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Rather than approaching comfort through the lens of the number of habitable square meters, and security through crime statistics or police presence, the feeling of ease allows to capture these notions in a more open way. It includes both the comfort in one's living place, feelings of security or peace, and freedom of action within the living environment, i.e., not to experience obstacles to achieve one's aspiration along one's life course. The fragments of narratives collected revolve around the following ideas: *"There are no obstacles in my experience of inhabiting, I feel at ease in my neighborhood, I express feelings of safety (physical and symbolic), peace and freedom of movement."*

On the positive side, the feeling of ease relates to tangible aspects (comfort of housing, easy daily life thanks to urban amenities) and intangible aspects (impressions of calm, revitalization, opportunity to be alone, etc.). Generally speaking, it can relate to expectations of tranquility, but also, partly, agency (see below). At the same time, this label also comprises the feeling of safety and trust in the neighborhood (feeling safe and free in all movements and uses of different spaces).

"People have always criticized this place; they tell me it's a neighborhood of thugs. I was brainwashed in a way. But when I arrived here, it was quite the opposite in fact. I come from [a disadvantaged town in Paris Region], I can tell it's not a bad neighborhood here! I have never been harassed, on the contrary, the people are nice, the young people help me with my shopping." 34-year-old woman in La Rochelle, living in social housing (collective accommodation)

Conversely, the feeling of ease can be eroded when there are perceptions of insecurity, or when movements or decisions linked to actions are hindered. We collected strong expressions, such as impressions of suffocation in their living environment or stress when population density or promiscuity is high. It also comes under eroded agency because the annoyances mentioned are experienced by someone unable to mitigate or escape these constraints.

"Before, the apartment building was clean and spotless but now it has gone downhill. There's dirt on the floor, pee everywhere, trash cans, the elevator hasn't worked for 5 years, you pay rent, it's expensive and you hope the place is clean. There are guys who spend all day there, dealing drugs. And I lost my job because of that. Parents no longer wanted to come and leave their little ones." 58-year-old woman, childcare assistant in La Rochelle, living in social housing (collective accommodation)

- The feeling of fulfillment or accomplishment is seen in the perceived opportunities as rewarding through individual or collective practices. Rather than a simple question of presence of amenities and use of leisure facilities in the neighborhood, this label cap-

tures broader, intangible aspects of self-fulfillment, of social usefulness, and personal and collective aspirations. Research on the psychology of well-being has highlighted the importance of numerous dimensions, such as self-esteem, having a goal in life, and control over one's living environment, as important dimensions of well-being, aspects that cannot be grasped in a purely utilitarian reading of a living place [61]. This label is represented in the form of a petal that emerges through satisfaction in the other feelings (Figure 1). Can we imagine feelings of fulfilment if the feelings of familiarity, integration, and ease are eroded? Fragments of the narratives collected express the following ideas: *"I find opportunities to learn, to participate, to have activities that mean something to me and that contribute to my sense of personal achievement"*.

On the positive side, this category relates to situations where the person has opportunities to become involved in the neighborhood life: *"They tried to have barbecues in a park. But that's typical to keep us from leaving our area. You don't need to start an association to organize barbecues. If you want to have a barbecue, add a little wood and that's it. [...] There are only activities for mothers. When you're 28, a girl like me, they're just waiting for you to get married."* 28-year-old woman, in *Les Mureaux*, living in social housing (collective accommodation)

3.2.3. Feelings of Having Control over One's Life, Feelings of Unfairness

In this group, we present two dimensions that appeared as indirect feelings. Stemming from people's reflexivity on their own experience, these feelings are the result of an appraisal of one's situation, generally in comparison to others. Both labels, namely the feelings of having control over one's life and the feelings of unfairness, have an influence on the other dimensions, and eventually, globally, on place attachment.

- The feeling of having control over one's life. We have seen that the relationship with the living environment is not static, and the experience of inhabiting can only be truly understood within the context of the residential journey and the life path in general. We tried to convey this idea within the label of feeling of control, which corresponds to the real or perceived ability to chart the course of one's life and to manage what happens. Rather than understanding the residential journey by tracking previous housing, or residential satisfaction based on preordained criteria, the feeling of control remains open to more complex and subjective experiences. It covers expressions of choices and constraints in general. This feeling of being in a chosen/endured situation appears reflexively in the narratives. The feeling of control may share similarities with agency; however, the former conveys a strict reliance on reflexivity. The fragments of narratives collected express the following ideas: *"I made the choice, or I accept to live in this place, I have some control over my residential path and more generally I have the feeling of having control over the course of my life, which represents me (or I identify with)."*

On the positive side, it relates to situations where the person has found suitable residential opportunities, or when they do not feel constrained by family or professional contingencies.

"We applied for social housing here, it's been a month. Before, we were in one of the buildings over there towards [local supermarket]. We didn't particularly want to stay, but it was ideal, I'm at high school in Valin, it's nearby. We got used to it here, the family has been here for 30 years." 17-year-old girl, living with her family in a detached house in La Rochelle.

Conversely, feelings of loss of control over the course of one's life are found very frequently in the body of narratives, unsurprisingly, for these deprived and segregated neighborhoods. They relate to day-to-day incidents (problems with neighbors that drive people to move out of the area, annoyances due to building works close to home, unhealthy accommodation, or housing that is not suitable for someone with a disability). Or it may be

related to an imposed residential journey (“this was the only accommodation available in an emergency”, “my children will go elsewhere, I hope they will have a better life”). In disadvantaged neighborhoods, the lack of residential choice, for example, is almost always the norm and results in narratives such as:

“I already knew the neighborhood, I grew up here [. . .] I didn’t want to come back here, but it was the only accommodation available in the emergency situation I was in. And now I’ve been in here for a year. . . The turnover in housing is the highest of the city. But in an emergency, we have no choice but to accept.” 28-year-old woman, in La Rochelle, living in social housing (collective accommodation).

“We haven’t decided anything. The people who hold the meetings, they have the knowledge on what is going on. We can only put up with it, we follow along, that’s all. . . for me as long as they don’t increase the rents, it’s fine. . . but will they at least have jobs for us?” 18-year-old man, in Nanterre, living in social housing (collective housing).

- The feeling of unfairness. More surprisingly, we observed the almost systematic presence of feelings of unfairness in the interviews, regardless of the neighborhood. It is a particularly striking result given the many public policies aimed at reducing socio-spatial inequalities through initiatives targeting underprivileged neighborhoods. The feeling of unfairness appears when the person reflects on their situation and perceives it as unjust (violating a stated norm) or unequal compared to that of others of similar condition (physical, social, or symbolic). Unfairness is more readily expressed in comparison to people who are close in geographical or social terms. Social and environmental inequalities, at the policy level, are often reduced to a descriptive overview with indicators of overall disparities, neglecting the structural forces that produce and maintain them. Entering the experience mode allows us to understand more precisely what situations lead to feelings of being a victim of unfair treatment, which affects the experience of inhabiting and undermines it, beyond merely redistributive inequalities. The collected narratives referred to the following ideas: *“I do not have access to certain amenities or opportunities in the neighborhood, I have the feeling of being unfairly treated, compared to my peers, I don’t feel acknowledged.”*

We do not usually hear positive comments about being treated fairly. It is when we see or experience situations of unfairness that we are able to react and ask for more justice. Most importantly, it is always the reflexive experience that brings out the negative feeling of unfairness. Such feelings can arise when residents perceive a form of relegation compared to the rest of the population, or when they experience unequal treatments compared to other social groups. It is also prominent when there is a feeling of abandonment by public authorities and a lack of consideration by society. We tend to associate this label with the idea of social recognition, inspired by the modern literature on social justice [62,63], taking the question beyond the unequal distribution of wealth and amenities.

“The Terraces [new housing in the neighborhood] are ugly. Actually, that’s not it, it’s that we, in contrast, are blots on the landscape. We have old rundown buildings, and the Terraces are too big, they hide everything from us, we can no longer see. And you see, at least, they have some trees, and here we have cranes.” 31 years old women, in Nanterre living in social housing (collective accommodation)

4. Conclusions

In this research, our objective was not to define *what well-being is*, but to unravel its possible meanings by studying its manifestations in real-life experiences of the world, starting with the relation to one’s living environment. It relies upon several epistemological, methodological, and ethical questions that we return to below. We also draw conclusions

on the possible implications of this research at both the academic and political levels, while pointing at some limitations in our findings.

4.1. Avoiding Universalist Perspectives on Well-Being and Recognising Diversity and the Value of Experiences

First and foremost, we tried to stay away from essentialist interpretations of well-being that assume that its definition and composition exist beforehand, and that it can be observed and measured, quantified, and probably managed. This is the implicit hypothesis of many global and local proposals of indices to measure well-being. For instance, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) introduced a Better Life Index (BLI) that ranks countries by an approximation of well-being based on diverse categories that were defined by experts. First, we may express suspicion towards higher indices that are only found in western societies, an ethnocentric western bias on progress and development. After all, these indices are mainly the projection of the creators' own values [64]. They postulate the existence of a universal pre-existing well-being that only needs to be actualized. We reject this conception as it erases the depth of human existences, as well as the diversity of ways-of-being-in-the-world.

In an article proposing the conceptualization of well-being as a signpost for the road to sustainability, the scholars Hirvilammi and Helne defend the adoption of a relational understanding of humanity, both social and ecological [65]. Furthermore, they seem to privilege good life over good luck (happiness), adopting a similar perspective to our eudemonic one. Although we subscribe to most of their arguments, rather than relying on a priori theoretical "needs", we attempted a partially inductive scheme, starting from what counts for people as it emerges in their experiential narratives. It may be of note that a link between well-being and resilience has also been proposed [66], pointing to the existence of significant interrelations.

In brief, the direction we took in this research follows two main ideas: (1) that well-being is embedded in life experiences and (2) that we cannot experience any world without being somewhere, most probably with other human beings. Thus, we turned to the experience of inhabiting, and the relation with one's living environment and community, as encountered (diversely) in daily life experiences. The dimensions that emerged from the narratives of inhabitants differ from pre-established or generic analytical categories. Their claims seemed to show that inhabiting is always a total experience in the phenomenological sense of the term that simultaneously takes all of its dimensions into account. Hence, we tentatively represented place attachment as a flower.

Although we referred to a total lived experience, it cannot be concluded that it has been addressed exhaustively, but, in fact, could it be? Our data were best dealt with in an open, non-essentialist fashion. This open perspective was noted earlier by other authors: "Since place attachment is an embodied relationship to the world, places are constituted by people doing things in place and thus are constantly being performed and are never finished", as Williams and Miller mentioned in [31].

4.2. A Heuristic Device as an Alternative to Analytical Frameworks

We may argue that, when working with situations of deep inequality, the adoption of the perspective of people is warranted. Rather than simply describing disparities, we wished to recognize what people experience as potentially unfair (a value judgment) and document their engagement, their motives, and acts of resistance. Our choices, again, belong to the constructivist kind of grounded theory. They are in line with the link with social justice established by K. Charmaz, of obvious relevance in urban settings lying towards the extreme of the deprivation distribution [53]. Some critical studies also defend a phenomenological perspective on social change. For instance, Kinkaid suggests to consider

Lefebvre's theory of social space with an emphasis on embodiment to contest the exclusion of minorities [67].

Despite our best efforts, it is difficult to avoid falling into the trap of normative statements and transforming open approaches into instruments that may exercise new forms of control. Relying on reflexivity is inevitable. Intending to remain as true as possible to the expressions and meanings found in the statements, we limited the hermeneutical operations to two steps. A heuristic procedure seemed a good fit with grounded theory, which starts with empirical results, with the intent to reach a satisficing (and parsimonious) representation, as opposed to an ideal one. In an iterative fashion, it helps to clarify the questions and suggest answers. It was not meant to describe sedimented objects, but as a way to understand well-being in one's living environment, dynamically, based on different, interconnected dimensions of place attachment.

The heuristic device presented in this article is not an operational tool for assessing well-being in the territories, but a way of understanding how residents experience their living place and what matters to them. The categories of feelings must be viewed as provisional and recurring milestones in an ongoing journey to improve well-being in one's living environment, a reality that we consider to be eternally open and unfinished [68]. The "labels" could very well be reformulated, given different perimeters and supplemented by new research in other contexts. They may embrace other constraints or theoretical inspirations. In an issue of the *MAUSS* journal devoted to the city and conviviality, the authors suggest that designing a convivial city is best conducted "as distanced as possible from any recipe that claims to be definitive, from any ready-to-use modeling" and "to consider that it should always be done without the pretension of being done once and for all" [69]. This is the spirit we suggest to follow when considering the link between places and well-being.

4.3. Social Justice and Recognition, Power to Act, and Freedom as Conditions of Possibility of Well-Being

We chose to rely on people's experience of inhabiting in an attempt to avoid two major pitfalls: the reduction in well-being to the satisfaction of a standard list of human needs and the closure of well-being on an individualist conception (an occidental bias), prying communities apart from their environmental, sociohistorical, and political context.

Sociologists have attempted to provide an alternative to the notion of needs by proposing, instead, aspirations to take better account of human complexity [70]. Starting from people's narratives and acknowledging the legitimacy of this source of knowledge allow us to move away from the analysis of generic urban needs (typically, housing, transportation, jobs, entertainment, etc.). Instead, we tried to provide a voice to the residents, highlighting what matters to them, as expressed in their own words. In consequence, well-being, in relation with one's place, could be investigated through its manifestations and the feelings of familiarity, ease, integration, and fulfilment. But, most importantly, we showed that none of these categories can be positive (rendering well-being unlikely) if residents are in a situation where they have no feeling of control over their lives and see their experience as a result of unfair treatment.

The social practices and choices people make on an everyday basis are always the result of known or perceived constraints and possibilities, as well as the value of their goals. We tried to express this idea of access to choices through the notion of agency, which we also see as intimately linked to that of freedom. In this way, "individual preferences", which tend to neglect the overall situation of people in terms of freedom and access to the choices they endorse and that represent them, can be avoided. We should note that the idea of a rational choice is an integral part of neoliberal paradigms that tend to reduce its scope to responsibility and consumerist acts [71].

Freedom, choice, and agency, within one's place, all bring about the question of appropriation, which we can interpret as the possibility of transforming extensive spaces into symbolic ones, like when one's house becomes a home, including for "oneself as another". This phrase, borrowed from Paul Ricoeur, retains, from Aristotle's ethics, the concepts of mutuality, sharing, and living together [72] (p. 219). For us, it is an attempt to clarify the notion of symbolic appropriation, made possible only if problems of domination and exclusion have been resolved. It depicts the human subject as fundamentally social rather than an interested, egotistic individual. Although the jury may still be out in this case, we suggest that empowerment (a process of developing agency) and, as a corollary, social recognition are centrally at stake. The narratives that we collected seemed to relate to situations where inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity are fostered over time (but not always or with difficulty), among communities, through social interactions that impact identity and self-esteem.

4.4. New Targets for Action and the Search for an Alignment of Policymaking with People's Problems and Expectations

Finally, we wish to briefly mention the possible implications of this work at the policymaking level, suggesting new targets for action and a better alignment with the problems people face, their frustrations together with their hopes and expectations.

Residents' experiences are rarely taken into account by public policies in the territories. These generally tend to rest on an abstract and disembodied vision of the—fictitious—statistical (average) human inhabitant conceived in terms of generic, environmental, or social categories and their expert-defined (pre)supposed needs. They also tend to do so when pointing at well-being. The report produced by the French National Observatory of a Public Policy dedicated to deprived neighborhood entitled "Living Well in [underprivileged] Neighborhoods" [73] could be such an example. In this report, well-being is described through a set of themes akin to the traditional sectoral divisions of public action with indicators that appear both incomplete and arbitrary. Thus, social cohesion is evaluated through attendance in education, diploma success rate, mental health metrics, and the practice of sport. The living environment, for its part, is viewed from the perspective of the pedestrian accessibility of shops and services, the level of crime recorded by the security services, and the level of poverty in social rental housing. This seems exemplary of the problem exposed previously with reifying, positivist, and utilitarian approaches to well-being. They can also lead to a teleological definition of the "good use" of the urban setting, whether of housing, facilities, public spaces, or of the city in general [74]. Human beings, their diversity of being-in-the-world and their free will would disappear under a universal vision of good life.

In the specific case of public policies directed towards disadvantaged neighborhoods, and despite numerous criticisms regarding gentrification, the dominant strategy, at least in France, still relies on changing the social composition of the neighborhoods by urban interventions intended to attract better-off populations, i.e., exogenous changes [75]. The illusion of social facts being the result of concrete urban forms and configurations is an old, hard-boiled naturalist reflex. Moving our attention towards the daily experience is not a new idea. It has been defended by geographers or urban sociologists like Henri Lefebvre as a way to overcome this sociological reductionism and its corollary, functionalist urban planning [76] (p. 117).

Pursuing targets such as social justice (including social recognition), agency, and freedom raises the question of the status of citizens and the consideration of their knowledge-from-experience in policy-making. Hundreds of pages of quotations from our interviewees have also left another important impression on us: our subjects were not passive recipients of public services; they expressed expectations, in accordance with their perceived status

and aspired to an improved life (even if modestly) within their environment and communities, despite the recognized constraints and amounts of effort required. They therefore learn from experience, both positive and negative. There are numerous incentives to reconsider democratic processes, especially regarding urban policies. The necessity of these revised processes has been documented to support the social recognition and empowerment of residents [77,78]. We insist that our intention was not to *consult* the public and then pretend to be their spokespersons, but our work was a way to offer a loudhailer so that those often made invisible and inaudible can voice their concerns in the policy-making processes.

In our work, we first turned to place attachment as a proxy for well-being within one's living environment. In the process, we listened to residents' everyday life stories, which provided us with access to the ways people relate to places, for instance, what attracts their attention, the vocabulary they use, and what they value. This might be of interest for sustainability studies since "being attached" seems a good prerequisite for willingness to preserve one's place, defend it, and even improve it. All circumstances, where policies, actions, initiatives, and social practices intended to promote place attachment might embrace issues of sustainability, provide opportunities for a collective discussion, including prosperity, fairness, and respect of the environment and biodiversity, as an alternative to top-down expert-defined, supposedly ideal solutions.

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