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A grounded theory analysis of local residents' perceptions of social meanings of recreational beaches

Introduction

Recreational beaches are not only a leisure space for both local residents and visitors to relax and do exercise, but also occupied with social meanings attached by the users. Generally, Lefebvre extended the elements of the space in the theory of production of space and proposed that the space was a combination of material space, spiritual space and perceptual space (Lefebvre, 1991). According to Lefebvre, understanding a space should consider both social and historical elements. The meanings of space are produced and created in the process of social actions, and the relationship between space and society interacts. In other words, the meanings of the space are generated from the space, and the meanings, which are attached by people, can change the space through social actions.

The social meanings of a place refer to understandings of the spiritual space and perceptual space. In particular, local residents' perceptions of the social meanings of recreational beaches influence the development of beaches and the protection and continuity of local culture. However, less attention has been paid to the importance of social meanings on recreational beach planning. The roles of social meanings in projects of coastal governance and development are seldom considered.

This constructivist grounded theory study was designed to explore local residents' perceptions of social meanings of recreational beaches. The objective of this study was to propose a model that reflected local residents' perceptions of the social meanings of recreational beaches.

Literature Review

Sociological theories and qualitative methods are widely used in social space research (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991; MacCannell, 1973). However, research in the field of coastal planning and governance was primarily limited to quantitative research methods (Baker, 1983; Bird, 2000; Ariza, Sarda, Jimenez, Mora, & Avila, 2002; Jordan, 2000; Priestley & Mundet, 1998), qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, are hardly seen to be used to understand individual perceptions of social space. Grounded theory could draw from the scientific tradition within the field of coastal planning and governance while connecting over previously uncrossed barriers of epistemology more commonly used in the social sciences.

Grounded theory was referred to both as a methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and as a set of methods (e.g., Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). As a methodology, grounded theory linked the choice and the use of methods such as coding, comparison, and memo-writing, to the desired type of outcome or knowledge construction, such as the development of a theory grounded in data (Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). As a set of methods, grounded theory consisted of systematic guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data that enabled the researcher to construct theories based on participants' own words (Charmaz, 2006).

As described by Charmaz (2006), constructivist grounded theory used an interpretive approach to qualitative research that was based on a constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998). Contemporary constructivist notions presupposed that everything was in context, and researchers occupied social positions that influenced how they viewed the world, made assumptions, and developed values. Constructivist grounded theory used basic grounded theory guidelines such as coding, memo-writing, and sampling for theory development, and used comparative methods throughout the analysis. However, it implemented a more flexible use of these guidelines, and emphasized the researcher's subjective role throughout the research process. Rather than assuming that theories developed from the data were an exact depiction of the studied world, constructivist grounded theory assumed that theoretical renderings were an interpretive portrayal of it (Charmaz, 2006).

This research attempts to construct a theory about the social meaning of recreational beach space in urban areas. As long as the researcher was aware of how their epistemological perspective grounded the research process, constructivist grounded theory was capable of providing guidelines for an effective inductive process for constructing a working theory.

Methodology

Sampling

A stratified purposeful sample of 12 men and 12 women, eighteen years of age and older, who lived in a coastal city in mainland China were recruited for this study. Qualitative research grounded in constructionist epistemology implemented purposeful sampling to recruit participants for whom the research topic was relevant (Creswell, 2002). Stratified purposeful sampling occurs when cases are selected non-randomly (e.g., volunteers, individuals who are available, etc.) from each subgroup of a population under study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Initially, the self-identified place of residence was the primary factor for recruitment. Any recruiters who reported their place of residence as not being in the study city were excluded. This theoretically informed sampling was common to studies of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Table 1. A brief summary of interviewees

| | | Frequency |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| Sex | Female | 12 |
| | Male | 12 |
| Age | 18~25 | 4 |
| | 26~35 | 5 |
| | 36~45 | 5 |
| | 46~55 | 4 |
| | 56~65 | 3 |
| | >66 | 3 |
| Education | Middle school or less | 1 |
| | High school | 5 |
| | College | 5 |
| | Undergraduate | 8 |
| | Postgraduate(e.g., MSc, Ma, MD, PhD) | 5 |
| Total | | 24 |

All 24 participants were recruited as a result of being approached by the researcher directly, or from word of mouth referrals from individuals who had participated in the study. As a result of these sampling procedures, individuals who agreed to participate in this research provided demographic information including age, education, gender, and socioeconomic status at the time of the interview.

Data collection

Grounded theory relies heavily on interview data due to the desire to understand people's perceived experiences. Therefore, to collect rich, descriptive data, semi-structured interviews were used. This study was based primarily on one-on-one semi-structured interview data. In addition, observations by the interviewers were added as secondary data, which included descriptions of the setting, the participant, and any meaningful body language and gestures that the participant made. The interview guide that was developed for this research was based on existing coastal management, human geography, beach studies, tourism planning, sociology and qualitative methodological literature. The interview was designed to elicit descriptions of participants' perceptions of the social meanings of recreational beaches. While it was necessary for participants to have experienced leisure activities on recreational beaches first-hand, interview questions were designed to elicit contextualized experiences of leisure time on recreational beaches and their perceptions of the social meanings of recreational beaches.

The interviews took place at both public and private locations that were agreed upon by the participant and the interviewer. The interviews were audio recorded and continued until all topics on the interview guide had been discussed in-depth, which lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. The participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality and were provided with an informed consent document and given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were allowed as much time as they needed to respond to each of the questions.

Data analysis

Electronic copies of the transcripts were uploaded to a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo 8). It should be noted that Nvivo can be used to facilitate these processes; however, it could neither analyze qualitative data on its own nor enhance the rigor of qualitative research. Researchers need to interpret and conceptualize the data and develop theories.

Initial coding. Analysis of transcripts and field notes began with initial coding. During this process, fragments of data were described using a short label that summarized and accounted for each piece of data. Through coding with a line-by-line method, the researcher began to define what was happening in the data (Charmaz, 2006). In Nvivo, initial coding was accomplished by highlighting the segment of data in the transcript, and then each segment was assigned to a free node with an associated description.

Focused coding. The second phase of coding was focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were compared and clustered based on the similarity or distinction of their content. And then, the most frequent and, what the researcher determined to be the most significant, codes were used to synthesize and explain larger amounts of data. As subsequent transcripts were coded,

new initial codes were compared against the focused codes. This process of comparing data to codes helped to refine existing codes and generate new codes when no existing code accurately described new data. Some categories were recoded multiple times as they were refined, some categories were combined with others, and some were broken into subcategories.

Results

There were three themes grounded in the interview transcripts, which reflected the meanings that local residents' attached to recreational beaches. These themes were constructed in a hierarchical model with three layers: individual level, inter-personal level, and cultural level. Categories of individual level referred to local residents' identity recognition, emotional attachment and psychological development. Categories of the inter-personal level referred to family bonding and friendship building. The Cultural categories referred to city image, presentation of local culture and localism of the city. Three themes were developed from these categories: 1) local residents identified a strong connection between themselves and recreational beaches; 2) recreational beaches, where outdoor leisure activities took place, could be beneficial to inter-personal relationships; and, 3) recreational beaches were the carriers of local culture and were beneficial to keep the localism of the city. The three themes were conceptually distinct with each other; however there were overlaps among categories and sub-categories in the model.

Theme I: Local residents identified a strong connection between themselves and recreational beaches. To local residents, recreational beaches not only were natural places for leisure activities, but also were attached with rich meanings. There were three categories under the first theme. (1). In particular, recreational beaches may influence local residents' psychological development. Specifically, the influences were represented in two ways. First, recreational beach was the place where local residents liked to spend time to cope with their negative moods. When local residents experienced stress or confronted struggles in their lives, they found recreational beach was a great place to relieve their feelings. Second, recreational beaches also influenced their personality and characteristics. The nature environment of recreational beach (and the sea) gave people a feeling of broadness, openness and endlessness. For the residents who live near the beach, there were also characteristics of openness rooted in their personality. (2). In addition, recreational beaches related to local residents' identity. Particularly, because the recreational beach was one of the most important images of the city, it was a snapshot of "home"- the place where they were born and grew up. In addition, local residents were proud of living in such a beautiful city. As hosts of the city, they liked to welcome visitors to enjoy their time on the beach, and they felt much happier when they heard visitors spoke highly of their experiences on the beach. Moreover, local residents thought that it was their responsibilities to protect recreational beaches. (3). Furthermore, local residents had strong emotional attachments to recreational beaches. In specific, the childhood memories of recreational beaches were cherished by local residents. Many of local residents' childhood memories associated with recreational beaches, and those memories could even trigger their feelings today. Additionally, local residents expressed a strong physical and emotional dependence on recreational beaches. Local residents could not part

with the beach and they did not want to move away from the city. There was a strong sense of appreciation and gratefulness for local residents. In a word, the attachment to the beach was not only represented by local residents' use of the beach for leisure activities, but also reflected in emotional dependence.

Theme II: Recreational beaches, where outdoor leisure activities took place, could be beneficial to inter-personal relationships. In particular, recreational beaches were great places to spend some time with family members and friends. There were three categories of theme two. (1). Many of the respondents expressed that they enjoyed the time spent with family and friends on the beach. They barbecued, chatted, and celebrated birthdays with important people in their lives. Those relaxing and happy moments happened on the beach made them feel that they were closer to each other. (2). Recreational beaches were also great places to meet new friends. Since local residents liked to spend time on recreational beaches, especially in the summer time, they had opportunities to get to know people there. (3). Recreational beaches were also the places that many events occurred. Some participants mentioned their experiences of taking part in social activities on recreational beaches, such as curbing pollution and participating into volunteer activities. Through taking part in those events, they developed friendships with others.

Theme III: Recreational beaches were the carriers of local culture and were beneficial to keep the localism of the city. (1). Recreational beaches represented the core image of the city. When local residents introduced their hometown to friends from other cities or countries, the recreational beach was a key word. In their eyes, the recreational beach was a name tag of the city and they encouraged visitors to have some relaxing time there as they did. (2). Spending time on recreational beaches was common in local residents' lives. When local residents felt happy, they went to beaches to celebrate. When they felt unhappy, they also went there to get rid of bad moods. They might run along beaches in the morning and take a walk after dinner. It was quite common for them to do this as a usual day schedule. Spending some time on recreational beaches reflected local residents' lifestyles and it was an evitable component of local culture. (3). Recreational beaches could help to keep the localism of the city. Based on interviewees' transcripts, it was said that the city changed greatly through fast development during the past decades. However, local residents found this fast process of urbanization was a double-edged sword. On one side, they enjoyed the convenience in this modern city. On the other side, they found a lot of traditional landmarks were missing along with the urban renewals. Although there were a lot of upgrades on coastal areas, those recreational beaches almost kept most of their original looks. And local residents still used recreational beaches as they did before. In local residents' view, the memorization and continuity of beach culture was meaningful, and it was important to keep the localism of the city.

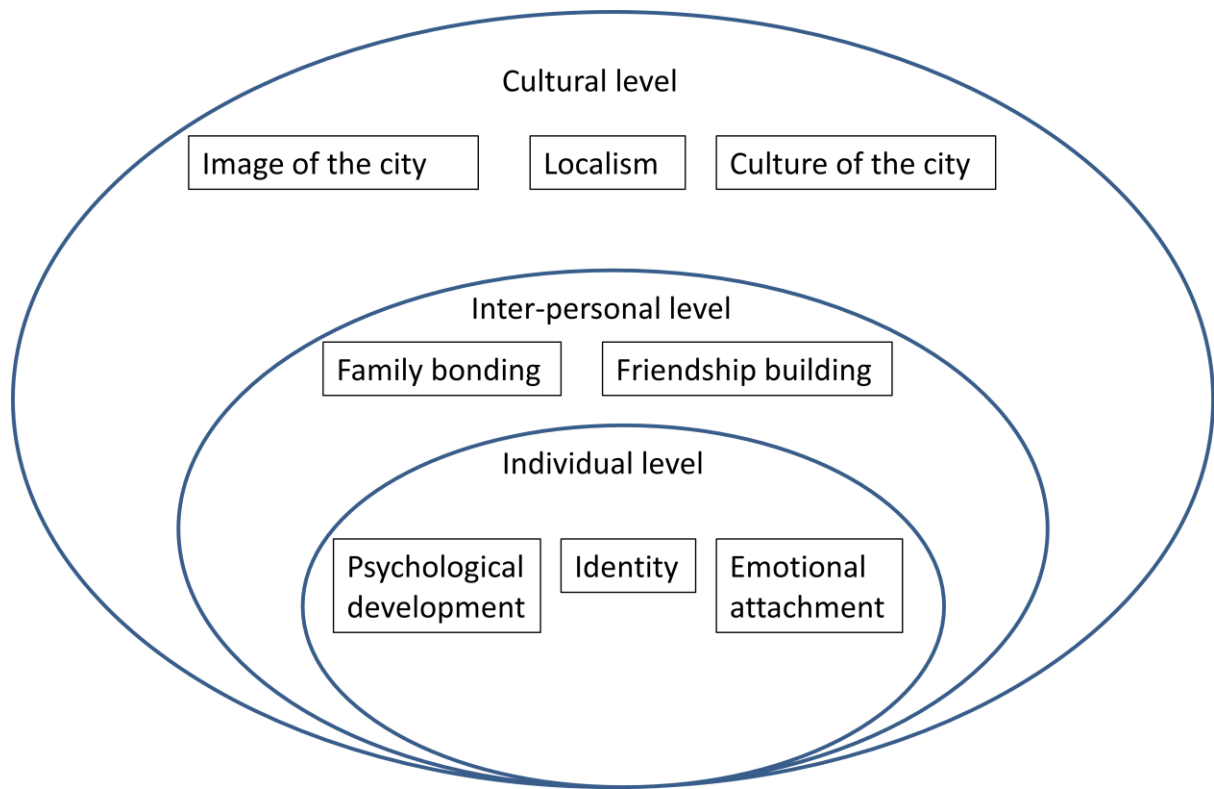


Figure 1. A hierarchical model of local residents' perceptions of social meanings of recreational beaches.

Conclusion and Discussion

The use of constructivist grounded theory guidelines for analyses of interview transcripts lead to a hierarchical model of factors that contribute to understanding local residents' perceptions of social meanings of recreational beaches. This model contains three conceptually distinct themes of social components that influence local residents' perceptions of recreational beaches' social meanings. Social components that are identified as being core of recreational beaches are: 1). a place with strong emotional attachments of local residents; 2). a place to increase family bonding and maintain friendships; and 3). a carrier of local culture. Finally, a theoretical model is constructed that illustrated the structure of themes and categories.

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. Previous researches of recreational beaches are focused on geographical and ecological domains. This study inquires local residents' perceptions of social meanings of recreational beaches, which advances our understandings of these spaces more comprehensively. In terms of practical implications, this study provides insights, from local residents' perspectives, to the governance and planning of recreational beaches. Since understandings of local residents' perceptions are keys to maintain the sustainable development of the recreational beaches, this study calls for more attentions to be paid on social meanings of recreational beaches.

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