

# Feeling at home in Lapland – University students' perceptions about place attachment

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## Abstract

In this article, we examine how students perceive Rovaniemi, the capital of Lapland, as a location and study the properties that enhance students' place attachment. Many students attending the University of Lapland come from parts of Finland other than the north, or from abroad, and leave Lapland after completing their studies. The study period represents a brief passage in the overall lifecycle of a student that begins with them arriving at Rovaniemi with different orientations and mindsets. The research aims to investigate the different forms of attachment that students develop for a place. The data were collected by means of empathy-based stories and analysed with the help of a theory-led content analysis. The characteristics that helped the students feel at home were the warm and welcoming atmosphere of the university, friendly nature of the Rovaniemi people, the small but, nevertheless, lively city that has an international vibe, scenic natural locations, recreational activities, and the possibility to build meaningful social networks. Some of these themes were repeated in the negative accounts, wherein the attachment was hindered by the distance between loved ones, distances between the city, the lack of public transport, and the problems resulting thereof.

Key words: Place attachment, university students, young adults, Rovaniemi, Lapland

## Tiivistelmä

### Kotona Lapissa – opiskelijoiden käsityksiä paikkaan kiintymisestä

Tutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin opiskelijoiden käsityksiä Rovaniemestä ja Lapista paikkana sekä sitä, mitkä tekijät edistävät opiskelijoiden paikkaan kiintymistä. Suuri osa opiskelijoista tulee yliopistoon Lapin ja Oulun läänien ulkopuolelta tai ulkomailta, useat jättävät Lapin opintojensa jälkeen. Opiskeluaika on lyhyt vaihe elämänsä aikana ja opiskelupaikkaan tullaan erilaisilla orientaatioilla ja ajatuksilla. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, millä tavalla opiskelijat kiintyvät paikkaan. Aineistonkeruumenetelmänä käytettiin eläytymismenetelmää ja aineisto analysoitiin teoria-ohjaavalla sisällönanalyysillä. Opiskelijoita kotiutumaan auttavat tekijät olivat yliopiston lämmin ilmapiiri, rovaniemeläisten ystävällinen mentaliteetti, kaupungin pieni koko ja sen eläväinen ja kansainvälinen tunnelma, kaunis luonto ja vapaa-ajan mahdollisuudet, sekä mahdollisuus rakentaa merkityksellisiä sosiaalisia verkostoja. Useiden samoja aihepiirejä käsittelevien teemojen alle muodostui myös kielteisiä kokemuksenkuvaus. Kotiutumista esti erityisesti etäisyys läheisiin, sekä pitkiksi koetut kaupungin sisäiset etäisyydet, julkisen liikenteen puute, ja näistä aiheutuneet ongelmat.

Avainsanat: Paikkaan kiintyminen, yliopisto-opiskelija, nuoret aikuiset, Rovaniemi, Lappi

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## Introduction

There are approximately 8,000 students who are enrolled in higher education institutions in Rovaniemi. They play an active role in the city life and contribute to the vitality of Rovaniemi. A significant number of them come from parts of Finland other than the north, and the university is a hotspot for exchange students. However, the majority of the students who move to Rovaniemi from other cities leave Lapland after completing their studies.

Students arrive at Rovaniemi with varying mindsets – some come to Rovaniemi looking forward to embracing the somewhat exotic new surroundings, while others move to Rovaniemi because it is their only viable option. For many, the place constitutes a fairly brief passage in the overall student lifecycle. What meanings do different students accord to their study place? From the viewpoint of globalization, virtualization and growing mobility, one might be forced to consider that places do not hold the same value as before. However, with reference to the same mega trends, it is argued that people feel a growing need and sensitivity to experience local and unique features in a certain location (Gustafson 2009; Lewicka 2011). In previous studies, place attachment is found to be related to the length of residence and owning one's home (Anton & Lawrence 2014; Hay 1998). In the light of the above issues, the topic of student bonding with environment is a rather interesting one.

Despite its importance, students' place attachment is a subject that is rarely studied. The number of earlier studies is low, and even then the focus is usually on the attachment to a university or a campus rather than the city or the area. (Qingjiu & Malikia 2013; Moghisi et al. 2015; Chow et al. 2008.) A successful place attachment and a sense of belonging are followed by major outcomes –

improved individual well-being, thriving and growing communities, and financial and social investments in the area (Elliott & Wadley 2013; Brown et al. 2003; Lewicka 2005; Scannel & Gifford 2014.) Therefore, a successful attachment to Rovaniemi might also result in an increase in students' willingness to settle in the city. This might be a way to bring intellectual, social and financial resources to the area.

According to classic humanistic geographers Tuan (1974; 1977) and Relph (1976), place attachment starts with a pause and the process of meaning giving. A space evolves into a "place" through personal experiences, values, and meanings. These experiences must be somehow meaningful in order for the attachment to occur, and usually they take time. (Manzo & Perkins 2006; Tuan 1974.) In the literature, place refers to a stable, bounded and historically continuous entity, or an open space and platform for social interaction (Lewicka 2011). Places hold values and meanings that facilitate connection or attachment (Tuan 1977; Farnum et al. 2005).

Generally speaking, place attachment refers to the affective bond between individuals and their environments (Lewicka 2011; Hidalgo & Hernandez 2001). Relph (1976) connected place attachment with achieved goals and needs when he said that place attachment is the authentic and emotional bond with an environment that satisfies a fundamental human need (cited by Scannel & Gifford 2010; see also Giuliani 2003). This is particularly interesting from the viewpoint of university students, as they are in an important phase between youth and adulthood, the phase of entering the adult world, exploring possibilities and one's identity (Arnett 2007a; 2007b; Levinson 1976). In this interdisciplinary article, which touches the fields of environmental psychology, developmental psychology and educational science, we try to shed some light on the extent to which, and the ways in

which, the chosen study environment fulfils students' needs and facilitates his/her feeling at home.

Theoretically, we leaned towards the three-dimensional framework of Scannel and Gifford (2010). In their framework, they structured the three dimensions of place attachment based on the vast relevant literature pertaining to place attachment and the concepts used in prior studies. In this model, place attachment is a multi-dimensional concept that consists of 1) place, 2) person, and 3) psychological process dimensions (Scannel & Gifford 2010). *Place* refers to the qualities and specificity of the object of the attachment. What is it about the place that a person is attached to? *Person* refers to the subject who is attached, and the extent in which the attachment is based on collectively or individually held meanings. *Psychological process* refers to the cognitive, behavioural and affective content of the attachment. The analysis focuses on the place dimension of the framework, since our interest lies specifically on the features of the place that support or hinder the attachment. (Scannel & Gifford 2010; 2011. See also Hidalgo & Hernandez 2001.)

During data gathering, we used the term *feeling at home*. Home is considered to be a special location. It is a socially and geographically situated place that serves as a unique place of familiar, known and predictable activities, people and physical elements, and as such can be seen as a central reference point of human existence and key element in the development of people's sense of themselves (Chow & Healey 2008.) Feeling at home is an easily understandable concept and refers

to the positive long-term bond that is created between a subject and a place and is distinguished from an instant aesthetic response. Thus, is it a term that refers to the theoretical concept of place attachment in comprehensible way.

The main research questions were as follows: 1) What is it about the place that makes students attached to it and vice versa 2) What is it about the place that prevents place attachment? The following secondary question was also framed: How are the physical and social dimensions of places presented in writings?

### Data and methodology

This article is based on 27 accounts of settling in Rovaniemi. The data were gathered by means of empathy-based stories (Eskola 1991; 1997). This method was chosen since we did not want to limit the data to students' experiences. We wanted to include perception and knowledge of the respondents. Moreover, the method was appropriate for the topic, which had not been extensively studied (Eskola 1991). Students were asked to write on the basis of two frame stories. A positive and a negative experience of settling in Lapland was framed from the students' perspective<sup>1</sup>. In addition, both the stories were provided with female and male protagonists, so that the respondents could choose the protagonist they prefer. In all cases, respondents chose protagonists in accordance with their gender.

Data were collected from the students of the University of Lapland anonymously via a

<sup>1</sup> Maria has moved to Rovaniemi to study. Life in Rovaniemi is good, she feels like home. She is charmed by the city of Rovaniemi and with Lapland. Maria could imagine settling to Rovaniemi or Lapland. Put yourself in Maria's shoes. What has she experienced? Why does she feel like home? Why is she charmed?

Maria has moved to Rovaniemi to study. Life in Rovaniemi is not so good, she doesn't feel like home. She is not charmed with the city of Rovaniemi and Lapland feels strange. Maria couldn't imagine settling to Rovaniemi or Lapland, she wants to move away. Put yourself in Maria's shoes. What has she experienced? Why does she feel this way?

webropol link. The request to participate in the research was sent to student e-mail lists of all faculties, Ph.D. students and two student social media forums between June and August 2017. The study focused on people who were new, specifically participants who had moved to Rovaniemi from other parts of Finland, except the Oulu region, Lapland, and those from abroad. The request was framed in both Finnish and English. Of the participants, 44 % were pursuing their Bachelors, 52 % their Masters, and 4 % their doctoral studies. The age of the respondents varied between 19 and 31. Five of the stories were written in English, while the rest in Finnish. Only two of the respondents were male. This reflects the gender bias recorded in surveys: women tend to respond in bigger proportions (e.g. Smith 2008; Moore & Tarnai 2002). The data gathering method could account for the fairly low number of participants (27). The writing task was probably perceived as time consuming, thereby leading to a drop in the number of participants.

The data were analysed with the help of a theory-led qualitative content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajarvi 2009). The theoretical framework provided direction to the formulation of research questions, and the findings were elaborated with part of Scannel and Gifford's (2010) framework. First, we separated original extracts from the data. Second, we turned the extracts into simplified expressions. Then, we divided the extracts thematically, and finally elaborated the themes that rose from the data according to the theoretical model.

## Results

### Social aspects of a place in the positive stories

Students frequently mentioned the university as an institution that made settling in Rovaniemi easier. In the stories, the small size of

the university was often described as a positive feature. For instance, it makes getting to know people easy, creates the feeling of togetherness, and makes the teaching staff approachable. The university was described as a warm and cosy place with character; the students were friendly, and the staff treated the students as human beings. According to one writer: Tomi has experienced strong togetherness, and this is because of the reciprocity and warmth that emanates from the University of Lapland (H2). The content of the studies was also categorised as a positive aspect in that the meaningfulness of the study content, and the sense of pursuing studies in the desired field, created positive experiences and thus fostered a bond with the place. However, the atmosphere of the university described above was a theme that took precedence over the content of the studies.

Another frequently occurring theme was the friendly nature of the people in Rovaniemi, which made students feel welcome. According to our data, the people of Rovaniemi were frequently perceived as kind and approachable. This disposition pervaded the entire city, and it thus had a warm vibe. As the writers expressed: Maria felt that the people in Rovaniemi are friendly and very easy to talk to. They have a laid-back attitude to life (H5). Maria enjoys Rovaniemi. From day one, she was impressed by the unreserved attitude of the people (H6).

The third aspect related to feeling at home was the creation of friendships. Building social networks and forming closer friendships is crucial, and it is connected to the sense of belonging. The following extract summarises well the idea that resonated in the stories: When her studies started, she made friends with other students and soon got a few really close friends, so she started to feel at home even more (H22). In this case, the fact that the protagonist made friends and built her social network positively affected her life and

hastened the settling process in Rovaniemi.

Also, the liveliness of the city had relevance as far as feeling at home was concerned. Rovaniemi was described as lively, especially, on account of the considerable number of tourists flocking there. Despite being small, the city is perceived as exuding a distinct international vibe. It is also viewed as a place that offers opportunities. For instance, Maria appreciates meeting new people and familiarizing herself with new cultures, so the number of tourists and visitors from abroad in the city makes it interesting for her (H6).

In our data, the following themes compose the social aspects of a place: 1. the atmosphere of the university, 2. the liveliness of the city, 3. the friendly nature of the people, and 4. creation of social networks and friendships. Interestingly, the atmosphere of the university and the nature of the people share a common ground. The people create the comfortable atmosphere by meeting others in a civil, friendly and humane way.

#### Physical aspects of a place in the positive stories

In the writings, the themes of nature, leisure activities and the size of the city formed the physical dimensions of Rovaniemi. Nature played an important part in the stories. The importance and charm of nature were described in various ways. Nature offers a beautiful frame, the aesthetic aspect of life in Rovaniemi. The closeness to nature also seemed to be very important, as one lives in the midst of nature in Rovaniemi. The following excerpt helps in explaining the situation: Maria appreciates nature a lot, and one can feel its closeness in Rovaniemi especially (H6). Nature is also connected to the theme of leisure possibilities that Rovaniemi has to offer. In the stories, the protagonists had ample scope to indulge in leisure activities, and nearly all of them preferred outdoor or sports activities.

The small size of the city was perceived as a characteristic that helped students feel at home. The city has all the required service centres and shops, but the city, and especially the city centre, is a rather small and peaceful place. Rovaniemi is just the perfect size of a city for Maria. It's not too big and exhausting, but big enough so that one can find interesting things and a variety of options (H16).

These aspects point to the person-environment match. In the positive stories, the protagonists liked the physical features of Rovaniemi: nature, outdoor activities that the environment makes possible, and the small size of the city. In light of these stories, place attachment is more likely to occur among people, whose values and preferences match with what Rovaniemi has to offer as a physical place. Interestingly, only one story described a change in the narrative (the move did not feel natural at first, but gradually Rovaniemi started to feel like home). Usually the protagonists experienced positive things right from the beginning - there was always at least one strong positive factor, such as love of the nature, social connections, activities, which started forming the bond between the person and the place.

#### Social aspects of a place in the negative stories

The contrast between the place of origin and Rovaniemi was strongly felt in the negative stories, wherein all the loved ones were left back home and the protagonist had no success in building social networks in the new place. In some stories, distance between family and other close people proved to be a significant unresolved problem, because of the tight budget and expensive tickets. Distance between cultural events and foreign locations were also mentioned. One respondent said: [b]ecause of the train trip to home and back costs at least 100 euros, I have to spend even a week-long holiday in Rovaniemi (H10).

Distance as a factor is also present in the theme of isolation. Here, the distance is not physical but mental. The protagonist isolates herself/ himself by not taking part in social events or leisure activities. He/she spends most of the time at home or immerses herself in studies. When possible, she travels away from Rovaniemi, so there is no opportunity for the bond between the person and the place to be formed.

Isolation is connected with the inability to form meaningful relationships. Isolation is the inverse function of formation of relationships mentioned in the positive stories. When the protagonist does not feel at home, has not found friends or meaningful, close relationships, or does not get along with her roommate, he/she feels lonely or like an outsider. She feels lonely and she has not been able to make close friends (H16). Not making friends and not connecting to a place is partly explained by the protagonist's inability to connect with the social atmosphere of Rovaniemi, the local mindset, or the symbolic and specific features of the city. Some stories mentioned that people seem different and the culture strange. People are too proud of their Arcticness and of their Lappishness [...] in this regard they are as bad as the Helsinki people (H11). Here, the nature of the Rovaniemi people is portrayed in a poor light.

Physical aspects of a place in the negative stories

The small size of the city finds mention in both the positive and negative stories. In the negative stories, the expressions related to the size are rather simple. She comes from a bigger city and Rovaniemi evokes feelings of anxiety (H6). Sometimes, the idea of small size is linked to the lack of shops or activities. Other physical features of the Arctic also evoke negative thoughts: [w]inter feels like an endlessly cold path of misery (H21).

It is very dark and cold outside (H23). The fall in Rovaniemi is dark and rainy [...] Maria feels gloomy because of the darkness and loneliness (H19).

Distances inside the city and the difficulties in moving around are significant reasons that lead to negative experiences. It is hard for the protagonist to enjoy Rovaniemi because of the distances and the lack of public transport. Public transportation is practically non-existent (H15). One should have a car in order to get around and have access to leisure activities. Biking in all types of weather seems dull. In a couple of narratives, through generally negative experiences, nature also starts to evoke feelings of anxiety: Nature feels like a distressing fish trap from which one cannot escape (H14).

## Discussion

This study shows that Rovaniemi, Lapland, and the University of Lapland have universally important and unique features that can both support and hinder the students' place attachment. The themes that arose reflect the specific life situations of the students, but can also be discussed in relation to other groups who move to Rovaniemi.

Regarding the physical aspects of Rovaniemi, students' positive emotions and attachment were mostly related to Rovaniemi's size, recreational activities the city has to offer, and the closeness to nature. The small size facilitated easiness in daily life, nature gave aesthetic pleasure and with it many opportunities for recreational activities. The small size of the university, on the other hand, was related to the social aspect of the attachment. Smallness was understood to enhance cohesion, warmth, and a family-like atmosphere where students were included, recognized and welcomed by the university community (Stephens et al. 2015). These aspects are related to the socio-emotional

well-being and academic success (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Osterman 2000). Both the people of Rovaniemi and the University of Lapland were characterized by a nature that is connected to the northern, Lappish mindset. This nature refers to a friendly, easy-going and helpful attitude. In the case of the university, this nature helped in creating an institution that placed less emphasis on hierarchical relations and included approachable and friendly staff. Also, in previous studies social relations were identified as a key aspect of place attachment (Scopelliti & Tiberio 2010; Chow & Healey 2008). In the study of Moghisi et al. (2015) social relations enhanced attachment to the university and scientific motivation, which also enhanced attachment to the university place.

On the other hand, in the negative stories, the northern, specifically Lappish, nature was described as slow, proud and too friendly. In these stories, the nature was something the protagonists could not relate to. Other themes that occurred in both the negative and positive stories were the natural surroundings, the smallness of the city, and the formation of meaningful relationships. The lack of close friends and social network was usually mentioned with reference to the reverse situation in the place of origin (Kelly & Hoskings 2008). Distance was also a frequently mentioned theme. In the writings, distance referred to the physical distance between home and between loved ones, physical distance inside the city, or the mental distance between other students and the university community.

Many of the negative aspects were related to the overall life situation of the students, wherein it is difficult to enjoy nature, the recreational activities, or life in general, if one has no car to reach the sites or if going about is inconvenient in daily life. In addition, not having the money to travel to see friends or family might weigh heavily on the

students' mind in the long run. It is for these reasons that life in general starts to evoke negative feelings, and thus meanings given to the study place are not the kind that would facilitate rootedness or the feeling of being at home. In the negative situations, the protagonists saw only instrumental or no value at all in their surroundings or life situation.

One important factor contributing to the negative experience seemed to be the overall feeling of being in Rovaniemi and Lapland without a plan, or an idea of enjoying and making most out of the time there, or without the thought or initiative of building social networks. The goals in the stories describing young adults' problems in place attachment seemed to be similar to those in the positive stories – to have satisfying relationships with peers, to study and develop, and to enjoy recreational activities. Also, Scopelliti & Tiberio's (2010) research on students' homesickness and place attachment revealed that personal development opportunities, such as new activities, cultural stimulation, and new people were related to place attachment. The negative stories never began as an active choice of the protagonist and usually continued with a passive voice with regard to the difficulties experienced, showing no intentions of looking up for opportunities to bond with the nature, people or the aspects of the place that were seen as charming and satisfying in the positive stories. The lack of initiative and negative experience can be understood as a result of the following varieties of stress: operational stress, resulting from a new and demanding situation, and emotional stress, resulting from homesickness and lack of family support (Riemer 2000). In previous research homesickness is linked to difficulties in studies and depression and can be explained by geographic or perceived distance to home (Burt 1993; Stroebe et al. 2002; Tognoli 2003; Scopelliti & Tiberio 2010).

Finally, the stories show the importance of the person-environment match (Bleidorn et al. 2016). It seems that the students whose values fit with the values represented in Rovaniemi attach more easily. Living close to nature, small is beautiful attitude, and building a community through social interaction were some of the values related to Rovaniemi in this study. In the negative stories, some of the protagonists felt they did not enjoy Rovaniemi because their values did not match with what Rovaniemi had to offer: the city was just too small and quiet, or the people too friendly. This phenomenon was present in prior research, people look for a place in which to live that seems to represent their self and their values (Twigger-Ross & Uzzel 1996, 208-9).

## Conclusions

Interestingly, the possibilities of finding a job and other opportunities after studies were mentioned only a few times in the stories. Instead the cosy atmosphere of the university, finding like-minded friends, meaningful content of the studies, and features related to the quality overall of life were frequently mentioned and formed significant themes. How people are treated and how they navigate and connect in the various social networks affect feeling at home, academically speaking place attachment. This highlights the importance of social networks, culture and civilized behaviour towards other people. The emphasis of the social aspects of a place also reminds of the importance of student unions (which were explicitly mentioned in the data) and other organizations and groups, and the whole university itself as a social hub, where students can take part and influence. Students long to belong. The organizations should take into account the heterogeneity of the student population and try to figure out ways to reach the people for

whom settling has not been easy or straightforward.

After graduation, the job possibilities are a crucial question. However, in the accounts they were mentioned only a few times. The writers suggest that it is very important that the city and the university invest energy in the things that make people attach and create an environment for innovations, and encourage and provide opportunities for the students to be part of the development of the area. Through this, students might create their own job possibilities and create an environment that enables them to stay in the north. Students bring vast intellectual and social capital to Rovaniemi, and many of them attach to Rovaniemi for the study period. The question is how to make more of them stay?

The public transport, namely, the lack of it was brought up frequently in the stories, and from the perspective of the students it is clearly an area that requires development. Rovaniemi is known for its poor public transport services, and the lack of a functional system is a surprise to many newcomers in the city. The public transport was referred to also on a national scale. It seems that in this regard, Rovaniemi and other towns in Lapland are in an unequal position compared to the southern cities. Although the city of Rovaniemi is improving the public transportation, there might still be room for creative solutions for this challenge.

The University of Lapland could make good use of the unique features of the institution and region. The Arctic is a fashionable term, but what really seems to make a difference for the students is the cosy atmosphere, warmth of the university, the distinct liveliness of the city, and the beautiful nature that surrounds the facilities. Smallness can be an asset, especially when it comes to marketing and branding the university. Rovaniemi and Lapland definitely has its charm, it just



has to be discovered. One writer expressed: Lapland is quite a different place than what you think it is before you have lived or spent longer periods of time there. It is not such a backwater as one might think (H2).

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