

Place Identity of Women of Bacolor¹

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INTRODUCTION

The following are quotes from six women of Bacolor:

Lucing: Bacolor will always be my home.

Lita: Bacolor is too dusty and muddy, and the roads are uncemented... Bulaon is really a better place to stay.

Cresing: We will surely go back to Bacolor.

Estrel: While I'd like to return to Bacolor, there is really no house to return to anymore.

Alip: There is no other place that I can call my home.

Ida and her daughter-in-law: We will not leave the place especially now that our Lord has shown Himself to us.

These were taken from narratives of women from Bacolor and is part of a larger study on the process of relocation of families as a consequence of the eruption of Mount Pinatubo and the subsequent lahar flows. The study was guided by Mileti's theory of risk communication (Mileti and O'Brien 1992) and employed a combination of social survey and qualitative field methods. All respondents in the survey are from the town of Bacolor in the province of Pampanga. The town is 65 km north-

northwest of Manila. Lahar (flowing mixtures of volcanic debris and water) along the Pasig-Potrero river system damaged many of the town's villages from 1991 to 1995.

From the 187 women respondents in the survey, five were selected using a set of criteria. One criterion was that the individuals should represent the 3 categories of survey respondents: two each from those in evacuation centers, those in resettlement areas, and those who continue to stay in the barangay. In addition, the individuals were selected to illustrate relative variation in socioeconomic status, experience of loss of family member and representation of natives and migrants to Bacolor. Narratives were obtained from these five women as well as from one who was not among the 187 survey respondents.

Lucing and Lita were from Cabambangan, the poblacion of Bacolor, which was buried by lahar flows. They were interviewed in their respective houses in the Bulaon resettlement area. Cresing and Estrel were from Cabalantian, a barangay untouched by lahar until October 1995, when the entire barangay was buried under up to 9 meters of debris. They were interviewed in their respective bunkhouses in the Ayala Staging Center. Alip and Ida are from Cabetican, one of the barangays in the town proper, which

was buried by lahar in 1991, in 1994, and again in 1995. They chose to stay in their barangay despite repeated devastation from lahar flows.

THE CONCEPT OF PLACE

What is common to all the women's statements? They all refer to a place, that of Bacolor. The term place is distinguished from space in that the former implies a strong emotional tie between a person and a particular physical location, whether the tie is temporary or more long lasting (Sime 1995). A couple of approaches to the concept of place which is of relevance to environmental psychology is presented by Sime. One is the phenomenological approach developed by theorists in both architecture and humanistic geography. A theory of place in architecture emphasizes the quality of a person's existence or "being in the world" (Norberg-Schultz 1979). In humanistic geography, Relph (1981), for example, simultaneously laments "loss of a sense of place" and expresses a concern for the preservation of existing physical settings which have evolved over time.

A second approach is illustrated in Canter's book (1977) *The Psychology of Place*. Canter conceptualizes place as the intersection among three elements, namely, actions, conceptions, and physical environment. Among these three elements, Canter seems to put more emphasis on conceptions and relatively little on actions and the physical environment. Sime (1995) criticizes the Canter model by pointing out that the emotional bond to places does not figure as an essential component of the Canter model.

To explicate the salience of place in the narratives of the six women, a more useful

concept that incorporates elements from both the phenomenological approach and the Psychology of Place approach is place identity. In this paper the conceptualization of place identity as presented by Proshansky and associates (1995) is adopted.

PLACE IDENTITY

Theories on the development of the self have put emphasis on the role of significant others and the social environment of the person. Almost neglected are the objects and things and their spaces and places. More recent theories, however, define self and its expression not only in terms of one's social relationships but also take into account the different places and settings where these social relationships happen.

Proshansky and associates define place identity as a substructure of self identity. It consists of the person's cognitions of the physical world. These are the person's "memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings and conceptions of behavior and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being" (1995, 89). The centerpiece of one's cognitions about the physical world is the "environmental past" which consists of spaces and places that were instrumental in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social and cultural needs.

Several humanistic geographers (e.g., Tuan 1980, Relph 1976, Buttimer 1980) have contributed to the development of the concept of place identity. Relph maintains that the home is "the central reference point of human existence" (p.20). Through a personal attachment to identifiable places, "a

person acquires a sense of belonging and purpose which gives meaning to his or her life" (Proshansky and associates 1995, 90). This sense of belonging varies with the degree to which the important activities in a person's life are centered in and around the home (Buttimer 1980).

The centeredness of a place or of places is assumed to be an unselfconscious state. According to Relph (1976, 43):

The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as centers of human existence. There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security...

Thus, the person is relatively unaware or does not generally communicate the full meaning of place identity. It becomes salient only when one's sense of place is threatened as in the notion of grieving for a lost home. Among the resettled residents, therefore, their attachment to Bacolor may have been taken for granted and were not self-conscious about it while they were residing in the town. When the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo and the subsequent series of lahar flows converted most of the town into a virtual desert, burying the place and all material structures and things in volcanic debris, the residents who were forced to flee to evacuation centers or set up residence in resettlement areas suddenly realized the loss of their place. It is like realizing how valuable something is only after one has lost it. This vividly illustrates what Relph (1976) calls

"placelessness." As a geographer, he was more concerned with preserving landscapes, historical sites, or public urban settings. Our application of this notion to the abode and precious possessions of people gives it an even more essential character. Fried (1963), for example, focuses on the personal experience of grief when the relationship between an individual and his/her home is disrupted.

It is thus understandable that for the six women Bacolor is a central reference point of their lives. They have varying degrees of attachment and sense of belonging to the town that they each call home. The object of this paper is to illustrate the utility of the concept of place identity and to show its salience among people who have been displaced from their home town and whose houses and other properties were buried in several feet of hardened lahar.

Proshansky and associates (1995) are quick to emphasize, however, that the individual does more than experience the physical setting. There are good and bad experiences in physical settings depending on their capacity to satisfy their desires and needs and what other people think, say, and do about their evaluations of such settings. Thus, for the women of Bacolor, living in the town for a significant part of their lives is no guarantee of their emotional attachment to the place. What have been their experiences of living in Bacolor? Were these generally good or bad? It is to these differential experiences that we return later to explain their different degrees of attachment to the place.

The cognitions of one's past and present physical settings are, however, remembered differently because we not only experience the physical realities of, for example, our

home, but we also attach social meanings and beliefs to it. In other words, our memories of social situations tend to be thematic. The cognitions that we remember are both highly selective and framed around certain themes. So for the Bacolor women whose narratives we took, what they expressed to us may have been their selective memories of their experiences in Bacolor.

FUNCTIONS OF PLACE IDENTITY

The five functions identified by Proshansky and associates (1995) are recognition, meaning, expressive-requirement, mediating change, and anxiety and defense. Let us examine each of these to see if these are applicable to the Bacolor women.

1. *Recognition.* For this function, place identity provides the environmental past against which any immediate physical setting can be judged. A person's experience of environmental stability rests on the affirmation of the belief that his or her physical world is unchanging. He/she recognizes that a given situation serves to confirm its continuity with the past and portends that they will again occur in the future. The negative effects of relocation programs where people are uprooted from their familiar neighborhoods are well documented. For example, Fried and Gleicher (1961) and Yancey (1971) described the sense of grief and frustration residents experienced when they were forced out of their cherished neighborhoods. While these examples were in the context of urban development, the Bacolor experience parallels the sense of loss and the loss of control of the residents and even makes

it seem more serious. It is, thus, against the backdrop of past experiences in Bacolor that the women judge their present place of abode.

To Lucing, her present place of residence in Bulaon is a far cry from Bacolor which provided her environmental stability. Her narrative described where she was born, grew up, got married and brought up her children, among others. Her whole life was lived in Bacolor and even as she described her present abode in one of the resettlement units in Bulaon, it was always with reference to her past one in Bacolor. She fondly recalled her life in Bacolor, her neighbors, the social and religious activities of the town around which life for most people like her revolved. Her family did not want to move out of Bacolor. They considered the intermittent lahar flows as temporary. To ensure their safety, she and her children rented a house in another town when a large part of their house was buried in lahar. Her husband stayed on in Bacolor with every intention to bring back his family as soon as conditions were deemed safe. Indeed, Lucing and her children returned after a few months. Thinking that the worst was over, they decided to build a much smaller house right next to the old, buried one still within their home lot. She fondly referred to it as "a small rest house made of sawali." Lucing sadly narrated how their newly built house again disappeared in lahar just 6 months after it was built. It was after this incident that they moved to one of the units in the resettlement area in Bulaon.

Lita, however, describes Bulaon as more comfortable compared with the present state that Bacolor is in. Noteworthy is her non-reference to the Bacolor that used to be her home. Lita had a bungalow type house in the poblacion in Bacolor. She narrated how the muddy flood waters affected their barangay several times after the 1991 eruption. After the seventh flooding which deposited several feet of debris, she took her children with her to Candelaria, Quezon where her parents live, upon the advice of her husband who was at that time working in Saudi Arabia. After 3 months, they all returned to Bacolor and similarly thinking that the worst was over, she had a new house constructed on top of the old one as was being done by their neighbors in Cabambangan. Her husband was still in Saudi Arabia then. He sent all his earnings so they could have their dream house built. This time, she said, they made sure it was high enough, consisting of two levels. Her husband returned from abroad to a brand new house. On the third year the lower level of the new house was again filled with volcanic debris forcing them to move all of their belongings to the upper level and make it their entire home. To Lita the most painful experience happened on August 28, 1995. It was dawn and the lahar came so suddenly they could not get out of their house as the doors were completely submerged in mud. She and her children had to use a ladder to reach the upper level of the house of her parents-in-law next to theirs. When the lahar flow stopped, she and her children got out and walked to a school where

most of the evacuees were. Her husband was not home at the time as he was working in Manila. Lita was teary eyed when she remarked that in half an hour the house was gone. It was in late 1995 that they moved to Bulaon to occupy a unit that they had previously applied for. Lita is concerned with the safety and health of her children. She said Bacolor is too dusty and muddy and the roads are uncemented. Compared to the present state of Bacolor, she said Bulaon is a better place to stay in.

To Ida and her daughters-in-law, it is unthinkable to move out of Bacolor. It is the only place that is home to them. Ida has 10 children and some of them are married and have their own families. In 1991 the lower part of their house was buried in lahar. What the family did was to convert the upper level of the house into the living area and even elevated it to give allowance for additional lahar deposits. When several feet of lahar were again deposited in their area in 1995, they again raised their house by about 16 feet and added a second level. Ida explained that only one of her married children lived with her before 1991. The others had their own houses not too far from hers. Theirs were smaller houses and relatively less stable so when the first lahar flow came to their barangay, her married children moved in with her. Ida's husband and sons are carpenters. Their skill was handy when they decided to elevate their house. Ida claimed that the fatal heart attack of her husband was due to his shock upon seeing their house buried in lahar. She said that the

presence of her children and their support helped her overcome the sudden loss of her husband. She said that they did not think of leaving Cabetican; they decided instead to extend their house upward with enough vertical allowance for additional lahar deposits.

Alip is from Surigao del Norte but speaks Kapampangan very fluently. We interviewed her in her makeshift house located on the dike in Cabetican. Residents refer to the dike as the control as it is designed to control the direction of the flow of the river and prevent the water from flowing into the barangay. Alip and her husband resided in Cabetican after they got married. He worked in Manila as a carpenter and came home to Cabetican only on weekends. Alip is a very entrepreneurial woman. She has substantial earnings from buying and selling fruits and vegetables in the nearby town of Guagua. The first flow of lahar in 1991 deposited sand in their house and covered the lower level. Her husband and his brothers elevated their house as well as those of other relatives. The following year, the house was again hit by lahar, so it was raised again. After the third hit in 1994, they decided not to raise the house anymore. They just redesigned the upper level to make it livable. Their only child is married and resides in Bohol. That same year her husband died of cardiac arrest. In 1995 Alip went to Mindanao for a vacation with relatives. She was persuaded by her sisters at the time not to return to Bacolor. She narrated that she often got sick in Surigao so she returned with her nieces to Manila. She then proceeded to Bacolor but not long after that, she

suffered a stroke and was confined in a hospital. It was while she was in the hospital that several feet of lahar again flowed into their village. This time it buried her entire house. When she returned from the hospital she stayed with relatives in an evacuation center in Bulaon. Upon regaining her strength she constructed a house on the control using materials salvaged from their old house and materials donated by the relatives of her husband. Alip who has had opportunities to go back to Surigao and even to join her siblings in Manila, still makes her home in Bacolor despite the inconvenience of living in a small hut on the control structure.

Cresing and her husband used to live in Cabalantian. Because their house was located right next to a creek, they became used to having slight flooding each time there is heavy rain and the creek behind their house overflows. Cresing is from Bicol and has lived in Cabalantian for 28 years. Her husband, the sole earner, is a tailor who earns a living from sewing and repairing pants. From 1991 to 1995, they experienced flooding intermittently. All they did was flush the water out from their house. In 1992, Cresing's husband was brought to Manila for the amputation of one of his legs. This hampered his mobility, which put him relatively more at risk in the event of evacuation. On August 5, 1995, Cresing and her husband decided to move temporarily to Calocan where they stayed with her brother-in-law. As they were about to return to Cabalantian, they saw on TV that their entire barangay was devastated. Because of the crowded condition in her brother-in-law's house,

they decided to move to the Buensuceso Elementary school in Arayat which was an evacuation center at the time. From Buensuceso they were taken to the Ayala staging center where they were provided their own bunkhouse.

Estrel was born in Tarlac, grew up in Pangasinan and became a resident of Cabalantian, Bacolor after marriage. She stated that from 1991 to 1994, they had experienced flooding and ashfall in their village. When residents close to the river reported that the water level was rising, she moved her children and belongings to the upper level of their neighbor's house. When the water level reached the level they were in, they had to climb to the roof of the house. Then a strong current swept them all away. She became unconscious, and when she regained consciousness she discovered that she had barely any clothes on and her children were nowhere in sight. She was reunited with her daughter who were saved by rescuers in a boat, but it was only the following day that her sons were brought to her. She became panicky when she could not find her youngest. It was her children who comforted her on the loss of her youngest child. They were brought to the Bulaon evacuation center and then transferred to the Ayala staging center after 10 months. Curious that no mention was made of her husband, her reply to our query was that he was with them but had no job. Her neighbors later volunteered the information that her husband left her and the children. Estrel washes clothes for some of her neighbors and assists a neighbor in making and selling local delicacies to earn for their subsistence.

2. A place provides *meaning* to a given setting because of the bundle of cognitions that indicate what should happen in it, what it is supposed to be like and how people are supposed to behave in it. These bundles of cognitions are the systems of meanings of places which enable people to understand their intended purposes and activities. The roles people play are in part defined by the physical settings in which these roles are enacted.

It is thus important in trying to make sense of the different degrees of place identity of the six Bacolor women to know what roles and preoccupations they had and how the physical features of the town or the part of the town they lived in played a significant part of these. Lucing was a very religious woman and her house which was located right next to the church facilitated her going to daily masses and her expression of religious devotion. The church which is centrally located also puts her other social activities in the center of the town. Lita's dream house was constructed in Cabambangan using the entire savings of the family. It must have been very traumatic for her to see it disappear in lahar in a very short time. To Cresing, it meant a place that provided her husband opportunities to make a living as a tailor. Estrel made little mention of her family life in Cabalantian perhaps to avoid recalling that part of her life with her husband who had deserted his family. To Alip, Bacolor is a rich environment for her entrepreneurial skills which together with her husband's income from the construction business provided the family a comfortable lifestyle. Bacolor is where Ida's family is. Their decision not to leave

Bacolor in the face of serious threats of lahar flows is based on keeping the family together. These all meant a very meaningful life for them in Bacolor.

3. The *expressive requirement* function of place identity involves cognitions that express the tastes and preferences of the person and those that represent what places and spaces actually require insofar as their primary purposes are concerned. "Tastes and preferences reflect far more what the individual desires because it satisfies some affective or aesthetic choice rather than because the setting actually requires it. Requirements are those characteristics of a setting that are necessary given its primary purpose, the activities underlying this purpose, and the fact that the biological nature of human beings impose minimal requirements on the use of a space..." (Proshansky and associates 1995, 99).

The women perceive their respective abodes in Bacolor as reflective of their tastes as well as their social status. This is evident in the location of Lucing's home in the center of town, her big house and the furnishings she had in it, as well as their social status and social network. To Lita, it was her dream house as all her husband's earnings from working abroad were put in the construction of the house. Its being buried in lahar in just 30 minutes had been a tragic loss for her. To Cresing and Estrel, whose homes were relatively modest in size and furnishings, these were also the homes they were proud of given their economic condition at the time; at least they had their own houses. To Alip and Ida whose respective spouses were in the construction business, their own houses were their family's "creations."

These were raised and reconstructed after each wave of lahar flow. It must have been a challenge to their spouses to express their talents and skills in the recreation of their own homes.

4. Associated with the cognitions of the person's preferences and requirements for various physical settings are also those that bear on the necessary behaviors and skills for *changing* them. The changes involve not only those on the physical setting but also those that regulate the social behavior in those places. This change mediating function of place identity reflects a mutual influence of physical setting and social activities on each other. It also is instrumental in the shaping of one's concept of self.

Lucing talks about the birth and growing up years of her children in their home in Bacolor. Lita deliberately or otherwise makes no mention of this aspect of her Bacolor life. Cresing narrates to us her life in Bacolor with her husband and their two adopted sons. Estrel tangentially mentions that they lived in close proximity to her husband's relatives as it was into one such relative's house that they climbed up to safety in the Cabalantian deluge. To Alip, relatives were neighbors and provided part of her extended family as her husband was away most of the time doing construction work in places far from Bacolor. As previously noted Ida's family was the center of her life and their residing in close proximity virtually made their part of Cabetican a family compound. While the six women did not characterize their respective homes in Bacolor, their narratives center on grieving for their lost

homes and how much different their present residential arrangements are from those they had previously. Most of them long for the familiarity of their former places and expressed their sense of loss not only for their homes but also their community.

5. Since the physical setting cognitions that define, maintain, and protect the self identity of a person are reflected in place identity, then it is expected that some of these cognitions may function as *anxiety and defense* mechanisms. They may represent responses that defend or protect the person against threat or danger in physical settings. This is evident in the behavior of the six women of Bacolor. They refused to abandon their homes even in the face of threat from flooding and lahar flows. While this may in part be a function of having received false assurances of safety, their rootedness to Bacolor made them resort to all possible ways to maintain their respective places. They tried putting sandbags to prevent the flood waters and lahar flow from entering their homes. They moved their belongings to the second level of the house when it was clear that the first level was buried beyond use. It was only when they lost their homes completely did they resign themselves to relocating. For Alip and Ida, however, the decision was not to move elsewhere but set up house on the control structure for Alip or to elevate the house several times for Ida.

CONCLUSION

The utility of the concept of place identity in explicating the different degrees of attachment of the women to Bacolor is evident. Their sense of belonging served many different functions for them which they recognized perhaps belatedly when they were relocated or lost a substantial part of their house. Why does the sense of attachment seem to be stronger for Lucing, Alip and Ida? Could it be attributed to their positively valenced cognitions and feelings associated with Bacolor, their respective homes, and the significant people in their lives? Their short narratives seem to suggest such. Why are Cresing and Estrel constrained in expressing their desire to return to Bacolor? Their socioeconomic condition does not allow them to even plan beyond their day-to-day existence. Their mental preoccupation is survival rather than a nostalgia for the better life in Bacolor. To Lita, our impression, although she made no mention of it directly, is that the loss of her dream home in such a short period of time was so traumatic that it radiated to other things associated with it like Bacolor itself and seemed to obliterate whatever positive cognitions of the place she may have had previous to the destruction of her home. To Alip and Ida who chose to stay in Cabetican, their feeling is that there is no other place they can call home. This may be attributed to their generally positive experiences, memories, and social environment. This is even more pronounced for Alip who is a migrant and has other and seemingly better options for residence.

NOTE

¹This paper is a revised version of a chapter of the research report titled "Processes through which Families in Bacolor (Pampanga) Respond to Natural Disaster with Emphasis on Relocation" by

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