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To cite this article: Arie Stoffelen, Oscar Kamminga, Peter Groote, Erik Meijles, Gerd Weitkamp & Aline Hoving (2023): Making use of sense of place in amalgamated municipalities, *Regional & Federal Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2022.2161526](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2161526)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2161526>



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Published online: 09 Jan 2023.



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





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Making use of sense of place in amalgamated municipalities

Arie Stoffelen ^a, Oscar Kamminga ^b, Peter Groote ^c, Erik Meijles ^c, Gerd Weitkamp ^c and Aline Hoving^d

^aDivision of Geography and Tourism, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, KU Leuven – University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; ^bDepartment of Economic Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands; ^cDepartment of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands; ^dHet Hogeland College, Warffum, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Political-administrative reorganizations are often underpinned by spatial and historical narratives to tap into people's sense of place and, this way, justify the new territories. Using a mixed-methods study of the recently amalgamated municipality Het Hogeland (Netherlands), we studied how sense of place is politically mobilized and in what sense this corresponds with residents' associations with their living environment. While inter-municipal collaboration had an administrative-jurisdictional logic, during the merger preparation, Het Hogeland mobilized the residents' sense of place through references to the area's landscape, its vernacular name and music. It also devised a participatory process involving citizen panels, polls and civil society input. Resident respondents showed strong merger support, and we found similarities between their sense of place and the municipality's marketing. We conclude that political strategies that mobilize locally embedded socio-cultural narratives and add co-constructive elements can bridge the gap between citizen and politics that regularly occurs following territorial reorganizations.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 6 June 2022; Accepted 16 December 2022

KEYWORDS Spatial identity; cultural landscape; place attachment; mental mapping; identity politics

Introduction

Sense of place, broadly defined as the connection of people and social groups to their locality, is a mainstream research topic among geographers, social and environmental psychologists, and anthropologists. Despite being a

CONTACT Erik Meijles  e.w.meijles@rug.nl  Department of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands

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spatial concept, most attention in the literature on sense of place and the associated concepts of place attachment and place identity goes to the socio-economic, demographic and psychological processes that influence sense of place creation such as people's age, ancestral ties and length of stay in an area (Hay 1998). The role of the spatial environment, including landscapes, in sense of place has received comparatively little attention (Lewicka 2011).

Yet, research on related topics, such as regional identity (Paasi 1996) and even natural resource management (Brown, Reed, and Raymond 2020) shows that it is useful to pay attention to the spaces and spatial elements people bond with. People use space and spatial symbols to respond to or even rally against political decisions that affect their daily life and identities (Zimmerbauer, Riukulehto, and Suutari 2017). Recognizing people's sense of place can generate support for regional development and landscape management plans (Moscovitz 2021; Stoffelen et al. 2019). Spatial identity narratives can also bind people to places to combat demographic or socio-economic pressure or justify political decisions such as territorial reorganization plans (Simon, Huigen, and Groote 2010; Stoffelen and Vanneste 2018). Studying how sense of place becomes politicized, and if these politicized images match cultural notions of place, is particularly relevant considering the widespread increase in spatial planning responsibilities on municipal levels, following the rolling back of welfare states, the proliferation of identity politics (Groenleer and Hendriks 2020), and the related quest to find bottom-up support for enforced spatial-administrative interventions in many countries following neoliberal administrative rationalization policies.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to study how sense of place is politically mobilized and in what sense this corresponds with residents' associations with their living environment – in other words, the institutionalization of socio-cultural and political dimensions of sense of place – in areas that reorganized administratively and territorially to counter socio-economic pressure and demographic decline. We use a mixed methods case study of Het Hogeland in the Netherlands. This recently amalgamated municipality institutionalized the name and landscape of a vernacular region; a distinctive area where the people consider themselves to be connected by a shared history, mutual interests, and a strong, common sense of place.

We operationalize sense of place by looking at two interrelated elements that make explicit the concept's spatial aspects. First, we look at the politically institutionalized area and people's recognition of and affinity with this area (Antonsich 2010). Hereafter, we call this people's 'territorial affinity'. Second, we look at the attributes of the landscape institutionalized in regional territorialization and place branding strategies, and people's recognition of and affinity with them (Vainikka 2012). Hereafter, we call this

people's 'landscape affinity'. With this operationalization, our focus is on the socio-cultural aspects of municipal mergers, rather than the administrative-economic rationality and performance of newly amalgamated municipalities, which has been studied in detail before (Tavares 2018). Furthermore, we do not approach sense of place holistically, including the elsewhere widely studied socio-economic, demographic and psychological processes that influence people's sense of place. Instead, we focus on how the spatial environment (both territory and landscape) is mobilized to justify territorial reorganization strategies and how this territory and landscape is institutionalized into people's consciousness. As such, we contribute to the literature by explicitly spatializing and politicizing the sense of place concept, and reflecting on its political-territorial role in the context of decentralized policymaking.

Literature review

Sense of place mobilization in a globalizing world

Ever since the humanistic turn in academia in the 1970s, people's place experiences and subjectivities in human-environment relations have received ample research attention (Seamon and Lundberg 2017). This has led to an acceleration of research into place meanings, with often-used concepts like sense of place, place attachment and place identity. In general, these concepts cover the cognitive transactions and emotional bonds between people and specific spatial contexts as well as the functional role of these spatial contexts (Altman and Low 1992; Proshansky, Fabia, and Kaminoff 1983). This research paid attention to explanatory factors for the strength of people's place meanings, for example, associated with demographics and people's life phases, as well as to constructivist views regarding the social and cultural embedding and content of these place meanings (Seamon and Lundberg 2017). One can synthesize that sense of place depends on an individual's personal experiences and valuation of the spatial environment as well as on collective processes that can be shaped and institutionalized through language and symbolism (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Simon, Huigen, and Groote 2010).

The interrelations between the individual and collective place meaning processes has become much more complex in recent decades. The current, globalizing society is characterized by new emergent spaces of economic competitiveness as well as hybrid and multi-jurisdictional governance (Antonsich 2010). In many cases, this has led to increasing pressure on local governments to generate economies of scale through improving the tax basis, to increase the economic competitiveness of regions in an increasingly global marketplace and to improve the efficiency of local

administrations (Stein, Borderstad, and Bjørnå 2022). Local territorial reorganization in the form of municipal amalgamations is often seen as a solution.

While the administrative-economic efficiency and democratic quality of such amalgamations is often under question (Blesse and Roesel 2019; Tavares 2018), it is without doubt that they influence regional identity processes. Sense of place construction has become multi-dimensional, relational and intrinsically political. With flexible multi-level governance arrangements to rationalize public sector expenditure and to search for more economically competitive regional units, mobilizing identity narratives has become a tool for embedding policy actions in space (Capello 2019; Vainikka 2012).

Already since the 1960s, political scientists and geographers have dealt with the question of how actors use cultural assets to support administrative state-building processes. Notably, Stein Rokkan argued that boundary drawing and internal structuration have been crucial aspects of nation building and state formation, which depend on territorial demarcation and 'membership' delineation through cultural and sociopolitical codes that distinguish between insiders and outsiders (Ferrera 2003; Rokkan and Urwin 1983). In a globalizing world of hybrid and multi-jurisdictional governance, this role of bounded states as politically enclosed formations that internalize and consolidate socio-political and identity structures is increasingly under pressure (Ferrera 2003). For example, backed by a study into political trust on the regional level in Norway, Stein, Borderstad, and Bjørnå (2022) argue that regional political discourses mobilizing area-specific sociocultural characteristics are an expression of the incompleteness and unevenness of national political-territorial identity (see also Rokkan and Urwin 1983). Capello (2019) further sees territorial identity as a strategic political-economic asset to (i) establish internal solidarity and feelings of similarity, including a differentiation from 'the other' (for example, the political centre of a territory), as well as (ii) influence the region's competitiveness in a hyper-mobile economy. These reflections show that both the redrawing of territorial boundaries and the mobilization of political identity frames signify a struggle between communities and outside (political, economic or socio-cultural) influences on multiple scales in a context of globalization (Ferrera 2003; Terlouw 2018). This adds to the already enormous availability of cultural signs and symbols, which forces individuals to negotiate plural options and fluid, networked spaces (Giddens 1991) that contribute to their 'human-being-in-place' (Seamon and Lundberg 2017, 10).

Institutionalizing regions and sense of place

Anssi Paasi's work on regions provides a further helpful frame to understand how territories and socio-cultural identity (sense of place) become institutionalized among diverse actors. According to Paasi (1996), the

institutionalization of regions and associated regional identities is a time–space contingent and power-loaded process that takes place along four inter-related, continuous and mutually influential shaping processes. First, regions are territorially shaped: they refer to a distinct, continuously evolving bounded spatial unit. Local territorial reorganization, often in the form of merging municipalities and through establishing networked cross-border governance arrangements to find the optimal size of local government in a context of devolution (Groenleer and Hendriks 2020), is a clear expression of this process.

Second, regional institutionalization processes include a symbolic shaping that essentializes the demarcated places. This symbolic shaping occurs through utilizing symbols, for example, names, landmarks, language, heritage and physical landscape elements in political discourses, but also through the selective picking of histories and narratives regarding the bordered area (Zimmerbauer, Riukulehto, and Suutari 2017).

Third, regions are (re-)constructed through an institutional shaping process, which institutionalizes the territorial and symbolic shapes into social and political practices that confirm and further give form to the territorial and symbolic shaping processes. This occurs through the establishment of formal administrative levels that use the name of vernacular regions in official communication as well as through informal conventions and habits that give legitimacy to these practices.

Fourth, regions are ‘established’ when they are ‘part of the regional system and social consciousness’ (Paasi 2011, 12); when the territorial, symbolic and institutional shapes are natural and ‘common sense’ for people, including the inhabitants (Jakola 2018).

Paasi’s (1996) distinction between identity of the region and regional consciousness of the inhabitants also applies to the above processes. Whereas the identity of the region refers to a spatial distinguishing process – i.e. an area’s natural and/or cultural features that are selected to portray the region’s typical characteristics, for example through branding – regional consciousness resembles the sense of place concept. As such, sense of place is not just represented in discourse but is also actively constructed in and by (spatial) discourse (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), among others to justify socio-spatial organizational forms such as nations state or municipal amalgamations, not in a legal or administrative way but in terms of popular consent (Terlouw 2018). In line with Capello’s (2019) view on territorial identity, Terlouw and van Gorp (2014) argued that the presentation of a clear identity of the region could justify the re-territorialization of local administrative areas, legitimize policy decisions, mobilize local stakeholders and attract inward investments; using territorial identity as a strategic political-economic asset. With two case studies in The Netherlands, they found that political identity discourses could turn existing regional identities into an effective policy

strategy by adding ‘thinner’, more modernist and future-oriented utilitarian elements to it. Vice versa, future-oriented political discourses could be more strongly ‘established’ locally (Paasi 1996) by linking them up with ‘thicker’, more traditionalist and historically grounded references to match the inhabitants’ regional consciousness (Terlouw 2016; Terlouw and van Gorp 2014).

Empirical studies into the mobilization of identity discourses during municipal amalgamation and territorial reorganization processes show that attempts to institutionalize an identity of the region can lead to various reactions. For the Dutch island municipality of Goeree-Overflakkee, which amalgamated in 2013 despite strong local protest, Terlouw (2018) found that resistance identities were built around ‘thick’ historical narratives, in a much more prominent way than before the merger. Zimmerbauer, Riuku-lehto, and Suutari (2017) found similar results for a municipal amalgamation in Finland, where residents transformed an initially rather implicit sense of place into a politically mobilized resistance identity that built on vernacular names and spatial landmarks. However, for the Goeree-Overflakkee case, Terlouw (2018) found that over time, even the most vocal opponents agreed with the new situation and co-constructed a new identity discourse, highlighting the sense of community and the area’s distinctive open landscape and beaches (Terlouw 2018). In contrast, using four regional European case studies, Antonsich (2010) found that residents did not directly link their identity to the studied administrative territories. These findings made him conclude that portrayed spatial identities reduce socio-spatial reality to a fixed territory that does not automatically overlap with people’s ‘lived spaces’, but also that ‘administrative regions do not necessarily need a sentiment of regional identity to exist as (effective) territorial actors’ (Antonsich 2010, 262).

Case study: Het Hogeland, the Netherlands

Study area

Municipal reorganization in the Netherlands has been an incremental process that started in the 1960s and continues in small steps until today (Deceuninck et al. 2010). The reorganizations are part of a gradual rolling back of the Dutch welfare state through devolution of policymaking. Municipal amalgamation is used to deal with increasing administrative responsibilities on local levels (Groenleer and Hendriks 2020). As part of this strategy, on January 1, 2019, 39 municipalities merged into twelve new ones. One of these was Het Hogeland in the northern province of Groningen. Het Hogeland formed out of the merger of four municipalities: Bedum, De Marne, Eemsmond and the larger part of Winsum. It is a rural part of the country, with demographic challenges

and related issues of maintaining public services. While the functional area is rather local when it comes to quotidian activities such as high school attendance and grocery shopping, the larger city of Groningen in the south is a large pull regarding employment and leisure.

The name of the new municipality refers to the vernacular Hogeland region. Translated as 'high land', it refers to the (marginally) higher elevation of the land above average mean sea level ('AMSL'; 1–2 m) with respect to its hinterland (at or just below AMSL). Although it is considered a single vernacular region, it covers two different cultural landscapes. The northern landscape (Figure 1(B)) consists of former sandy salt marsh ridges, which were deposited as supra high tide sediments on the land-sea interface. The ridges follow the dominant tide and wind direction from west to east. On the ridges, villages were built on dwelling mounds (terps) from the Iron Age onwards. These were raised in the centuries thereafter to a maximum of 4 metres to be safe from floods (Bazelmans et al. 2012). They are part of a larger terp landscape, stretching from the northern Netherlands to southern Denmark (Nieuwhof et al. 2019). Straight canals and roads lead towards the current coastline, separating open, arable lands consisting of fertile sandy

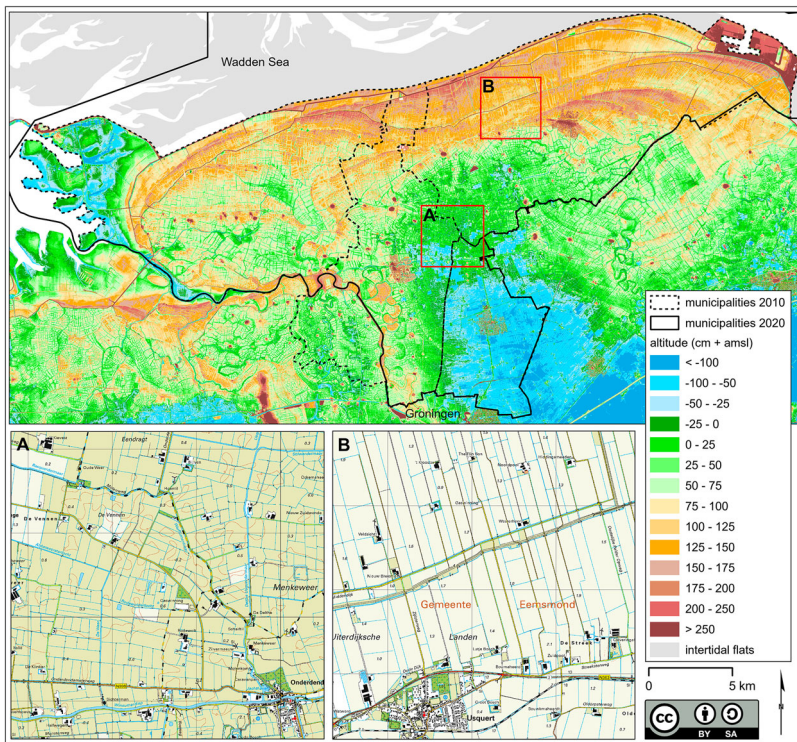


Figure 1. Topographical situation of the Hogeland area.

clay soil. Towards the sea, the polders, surrounded by dikes, become younger, and higher above sea level, since they had the opportunity to grow with rising sea levels during the last centuries (about 2 m in the last two millennia; (Meijles et al. 2018)). Large, singular farmhouses are distributed in the polders. Trees are only present directly surrounding the farmhouses and in the terp villages, resulting in an open landscape.

Inland, the land is lower and consists of former salt marsh flats. Originally, this area was sparsely populated due to flood risk. Former creeks are taken up in the canal system, resulting in arable parcels with twisting natural drainage patterns in combination with straight canals (Figure 1(A)). Due to the heavy clay soils, the land is only suitable for permanent pasture. The only trees present encircle farms. Church towers and traditional windmills in the terp villages are visible from long distances. The open skies and flat, open lands inspired many painters and poets, as reflected in a typical region expression which translates as 'land and sky, a grand flight, sight without borders, only to desire'.¹

The borders of the vernacular Hogeland region are not absolute. The area is delineated by the coastline in the north and several former tidal rivers to the west and southeast. The borders of the Het Hogeland municipality and the Hogeland vernacular region are similar but not identical (see Figure 4). The new municipality includes areas in the west and south that are traditionally not considered part of the vernacular region. Depending on its delineation, a part of the vernacular region in the east is not included in the new municipality but has become part of the new Eemdelta municipality; another newly amalgamated municipality, which came into existence in 2021.

Methodology

In this paper, we combine policy analysis with research into people's territorial and spatial affinity to understand how the territorial and symbolic shaping of Het Hogeland is institutionalized and established in people's consciousness. We designed a mixed methods research approach. We combined a qualitative study into the territorial and symbolic attributes institutionalized in the municipal merger and subsequent place branding strategy of Het Hogeland, as well as the logic behind selecting these attributes, with a quantitative study into residents' territorial and landscape affinity.

For the policy study, we conducted eight interviews in early 2020 with people involved in the merger's strategic decision-making. We combined purposive and snowball sampling to contact the interviewees, including politicians, a brand strategist, a programme manager, promotion officers and artists involved in the merger. The interviewees were involved in all political and practical discussions surrounding the merger. We complemented the interviews with purposively sampled policy documents that covered

strategic, larger decisions in the merger process and the municipality's subsequent place branding. We conducted three interviews face-to-face. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted the remaining interviews online. We asked about the development of the merger process over time. We also asked about the socio-cultural discussions that were held, searching for information about key events and opinions that enabled us to reflect on why certain territorial decisions were made and the use of which symbols was decided upon to institutionalize the new municipality.

For the study of the residents' territorial and landscape affinity, we collected 169 questionnaires, including mental maps, in November 2019. 157 of these were completed by people living in the new municipality. The remaining 12 respondents lived outside the new municipality. We had a slight overrepresentation of people younger than 25 years old in our sample. We collected the questionnaires with assistance from pupils enrolled in the third grade of the secondary school *Hogeland College* in the town of Warffum, as part of an assignment for their geography class. This college is the largest and most centrally located of the six high schools in the area. The pupils did not fill in the questionnaires themselves but were asked to distribute and collect at least five questionnaires among family members, friends and acquaintances throughout the area. By doing so, we had access to a larger and more diverse group of potential respondents, considering that the pupils are more embedded in the region than the authors of this study. This arguably improved participation rates, considering the trust that the school's endorsement of the project may have invoked (Manohar et al. 2019). Moreover, the project was follow-up research of a previous study done by the current lecturer of the class. Finally, it allowed combining research and educational outreach at the high school level, which is explicitly valued at the university level in the Netherlands. Considering that attending a certain high school in the Netherlands is not a social group membership indicator of any kind, we could reach diverse socio-economic and demographic strata with this sampling method. The pupils were supported by their teacher, who is one of the authors of this paper. One of the paper's other authors gave a class to the pupils to explain the background of the study and the origin of the area's landscape. The pupils were informed in detail about proper survey conduct.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: a mental mapping exercise looking into people's territorial affinity and a quantitative section looking into their landscape affinity. Following previous research that cognitive boundary mapping can highlight places of attachment of residents (Boschman and Cubbon 2014; Stoffelen et al. 2019) and of areas of perceived optimal social use (Brown, Reed, and Raymond 2020), we asked the respondents to draw the boundaries of the area that they understood as 'Hogeland'

on a base map. Since we wanted to capture the respondents' independent interpretation of what constitutes this area, we did not specify the municipality or the vernacular region. In the second part, we asked people to identify characteristic elements of the area's landscape, both in reply to an open question and scored on a five-point scale for 22 characteristic elements of the Hogeland landscape derived from policy documents and existing regional monographs. We also asked about their recognition of and identification with the Hogeland area (unspecified), their identification with the Het Hogeland municipality and their former municipality, and their assessment of the new municipality's place branding.

The research complies with ethical social research principles including informed consent (Vanclay, Baines, and Taylor 2013). The research methodology was cross-checked with the ethics procedure of the relevant university's ethics committee. As a low-risk project, no formal approval of the committee was required.

Data analysis

We transcribed all interviews and returned the texts to the interviewees to check and if necessary, adapt. All but one interviewee consented with the provided transcript. We did not include quotes of the respondent who did not consent and anonymized all other quotes. We started the analysis with descriptive coding: the assigning of topic labels to the transcripts. Afterwards, we reorganized, merged or deleted the descriptive codes to create order and identify overarching themes ('pattern coding') (Stoffelen 2019). We then constructed a coding tree based on the literature review to compare the themes identified in the pattern coding with the expected themes, based on the literature. This allowed us to cross-reference the empirical findings with our conceptual frame of analysis to come up with the results and reflections below.

Secondly, using the questionnaire data, we coded what the respondents deemed the most characteristic landscape elements using the 22 landscape elements derived from the literature. We also compared these free (open) landscape associations with the landscape elements portrayed in the newly designed municipal logo.

The third part of the analysis consisted of studying the spatial boundary maps. We used composite overlap mapping to create density maps of respondent recognition of the Hogeland area. We studied if the place of residence influences the spatial recognition of the area. Finally, we compared the spatial recognition of the area with the official administrative boundaries of Het Hogeland and with the landscape boundaries delineated by landscape experts.

Results

The territorial shaping of Het Hogeland

The basis for the merger was laid in 2008 with formal collaboration between the former municipalities that currently constitute Het Hogeland. The *Vereniging van Groninger Gemeenten* (the association of municipalities in the province of Groningen) advised to collaborate because the individual municipalities did not have sufficient administrative capacity to deal with increasing responsibilities that resulted from governmental decentralization in the Netherlands (Visitatiecommissie Bestuurlijke Toekomst Groningen 2013). Respondents noted that, at the time, a merger was not on the cards. They labelled the model they pursued 'SETA' ('samen en toch apart' – 'together, yet separate'):

The tone was, as I interpreted it, 'we don't want to merge but we do want to cooperate'. (*Municipal politician 1*)

I assumed that we cooperated but that we could continue to exist independently as [separate] municipalities. (*Municipal politician 2*)

One collaborative arrangement was the so-called BMW cluster between Bedum, De Marne and Winsum. These municipalities had largely similar population sizes, settlement patterns, and societal issues to deal with. However, cooperation lacked mutual trust and goals, and tended to be lengthy and laborious. Further devolution of governmental responsibilities, imposed by the Dutch government, put even more pressure on local institutional power, leading to a merger recommendation in the 2013 document *Grenzeloos Grunnen* ('borderless Groningen'). Following this publication, several potential merger configurations were considered but preferences greatly varied over the years. One option was the G7, consisting of seven municipalities within the province: Delfzijl, Eemsum, Appingedam, Loppersum, Winsum, Bedum and De Marne. Not everyone was comfortable with this because of the danger of an increasing distance between administrations and inhabitants:

[G7] was way too large. (...) Contact between the administration, with that I also mean the council, and inhabitants would heavily dilute. (*Municipal politician 2*)

The BMW configuration was considered financially insufficiently strong, considering the relatively low incomes from municipal taxes. Adding Eemsum, which includes the maritime port of Eemshaven, was a rational decision to even out the power relations in the region. However, socio-cultural considerations also seemed to play a role:

When you take an economic perspective, you say: we've got Groningen Seaports who owns the harbors in Delfzijl and Eemshaven. Magnificent.

However, inhabitants don't have a connection with an economic approach like that. They have more of a regional sense [of belonging]. (*Municipal politician 3*)

In 2016, the BMWÉ councils, including Eemsmond, unanimously decided to merge. However, the provincial executive council was not convinced and requested additional argumentation. BMWÉ created a document in which they highlighted, among other things, the shared ties dating back to the Medieval period, as well as the area's agricultural character (BMWÉ 2017). Even though the discussion was primarily economic and public policy oriented, shared socio-cultural and historical characteristics became increasingly important to generate support among various stakeholders. In this respect, policymakers and public administrations on both the municipal and provincial levels were the main architects of the merger, not just regarding decisions about administrative rationalities but also regarding the merger's socio-cultural embedding.

Socio-cultural reflections were almost exclusively positive in the merger process, mostly to justify the BMWÉ territorial shape, except for a small area in the south surrounding the village of Ezinge (Figure 4). Whereas the interviewees noted that inhabitants tended to be rather disengaged in the lead-up to the merger, for example, reflected by low turnouts at public meetings, people in Ezinge used the merger plans to correct a 'historical mistake' (personal communication, municipal politician 2). The historic landscape of 'Middag-Hunsterland' to which Ezinge belongs was divided over several municipalities in a previous round of municipal reorganization but turned out to be 'sticky' (Zimmerbauer, Riukulehto, and Suutari 2017). When the BMWÉ merger was approved by the provincial executive council, a referendum was held to measure support for the BMWÉ construct, which led to Ezinge not joining the new municipality. Ultimately, Het Hogeland started on 1 January, 2019 (Figure 2).

The symbolic and institutional shaping of Het Hogeland

The inhabitants decided on the new municipality's name through a public poll in 2017. They had three options: Het Hogeland, Hunsingo and Marenland, referring, in order, to the vernacular region, the historical area and the landscape (in local dialect). A commission of inhabitants created this shortlist from around 240 submissions (Dagblad van het Noorden 2017). Making it possible for inhabitants to participate in the decision-making served to legitimize the new region:

The name also reflects a part of the identity: 'do I feel acknowledged'. (...) In that way, you try to involve people and tie them to the new municipality. (*Municipal politician 2*)

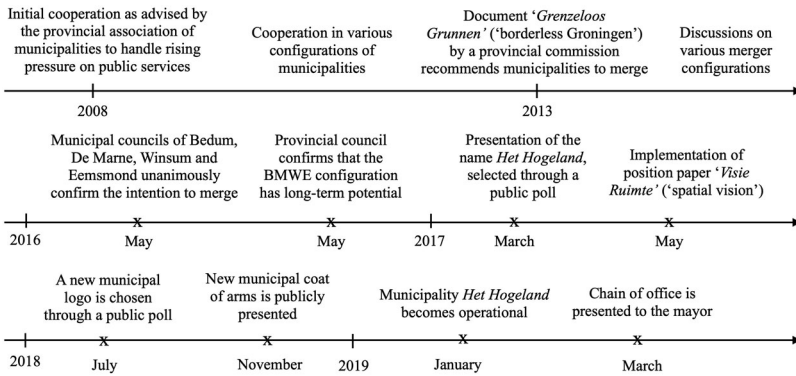


Figure 2. Timeline of the Het Hogeland merger.

The same interviewee referred to the impersonal name of a newly amalgamated municipality in the same province, 'Midden-Groningen' ('Middle of Groningen'), to highlight what they did not want:

Everybody soon said: we mustn't have a name like Midden-Groningen. That's a name that you don't feel connected with. It doesn't say anything. (*Municipal politician 2*)

With 71% of in total 17.500 votes, 'Het Hogeland' won clearly (Dagblad van het Noorden 2017). The overall turnout was 44%, similar to the turnout at municipal elections (for comparison: 52% in 2018; Databank Verkiezingsuitslagen 2018). One interviewee stated that the name refers to something on a deeper emotional level:

It has something homely: 'Het Hogeland'. It isn't something created. (...) It also appeals to something different than only a spatial unit. (...) It happens to be a song, a school, a museum. These are all things people feel connected with. (*Municipal politician 3*)

The name 'Hogeland' features widely in the area in the names of a high school, sports clubs, cultural associations, camp sites and so on. In effect, through the public poll, inhabitants incorporated the historically embedded Hogeland name into the formal, collective narrative, adding to this region's institutional shape.

Another, albeit smaller, public poll was organized to let inhabitants choose between two municipal logo alternatives. One was an abstract representation of spaciousness, consisting of vertical lines of varying length and colour, reflecting the municipality's vision to provide space for everyone to develop themselves and be creative. The second (ultimately selected with a two-thirds majority out of 1400 votes) was more figurative (Figure 3). The illustrations were based on the lyrics of 'mien Hogelaand' by Ede Staal (a



Figure 3. The Het Hogeland municipal logo. Reproduced with permission.

regional singer-songwriter and poet, 1941–1986), a well-known, romanticizing song about the area's landscape and identity, sung in the local dialect. Some future-oriented illustrations were added as well:

Eemshaven, industry and the themes energy and sustainability absolutely had to be included. Because that may well be the future of our municipality. (...) Furthermore, a boy with a kite can be recognized in the logo. He's a symbol for the new, young municipality Het Hogeland, where there are plenty of possibilities for growth and development. (*Brand strategist*)

This balance between historically grounded, traditionalist and future-oriented, modernist identity elements also appeared in the coat of arms and mayor's chain of office. For the coat of arms, local history associations were contacted, again to generate community support, resulting in a design full of references to the terp landscape, a Medieval coat of arms, and the area's agricultural character. The mayor's chain of office features the future-oriented, political, and economic narrative of Het Hogeland, to counter-balance the historical references on the coat of arms which is attached to the chain.

Internalization of the region

Residents' territorial affinity with the Hogeland area

The average strength of the respondents' affinity with the Hogeland area on a five-point scale, with 1 being very low and 5 being very high, was 3.0 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This was not statistically different from the respondents' affinity with their previous municipality (3.0; $p = 0.81$). In a regression analysis with the respondents' affinity as the dependent variable the respondents' pre-merger municipality of residence proved not statistically significant. The respondents' current vision regarding the merger (3.1) was significantly higher than their first reaction to the merger (2.9; $p < 0.000$). These results are remarkable because several parts of the area, particularly around Bedum and De Marne in the west and south, are not traditionally

associated with the Hogeland landscape (Figure 4). Moreover, the fact that there was no significant difference in the respondents' affinity between the old municipality and the Hogeland area indicates that respondents have quickly incorporated the Hogeland into their consciousness or that the new municipality capitalized on a latent regional consciousness of the inhabitants.

When analysing which area the respondents considered to be Hogeland, we found that the respondents' mental maps largely overlap with expert-based cultural landscape boundaries of the Hogeland area (Figure 4). Most respondents (>50%) drew a boundary further to the west than Schroor (2009) and Knottnerus (2013), who drew the most progressive western boundaries of the landscape experts. 48 polygons (31%) were even drawn into the Lauwersmeer area near Lauwersoog in the far west, which was only reclaimed from the sea in 1969 and never part of the 'traditional' Hogeland territory. In the south, the municipal boundary clearly deviates from the respondents' and landscape experts' views, with landscape experts having a more conservative view than most of the respondents: up to 80 polygons (just over 50%) drew the polygon further south than the experts. Interestingly, the boundary of the majority polygon neatly matches the municipal boundary near the Ezinge area in the southwest.

When differentiating the mental maps according to the respondents' place of residence, some minor differences appeared. The overlap of the respondents' mental maps from De Marne in the west with the new municipality was somewhat lower than from the respondents in other sub-areas (73%

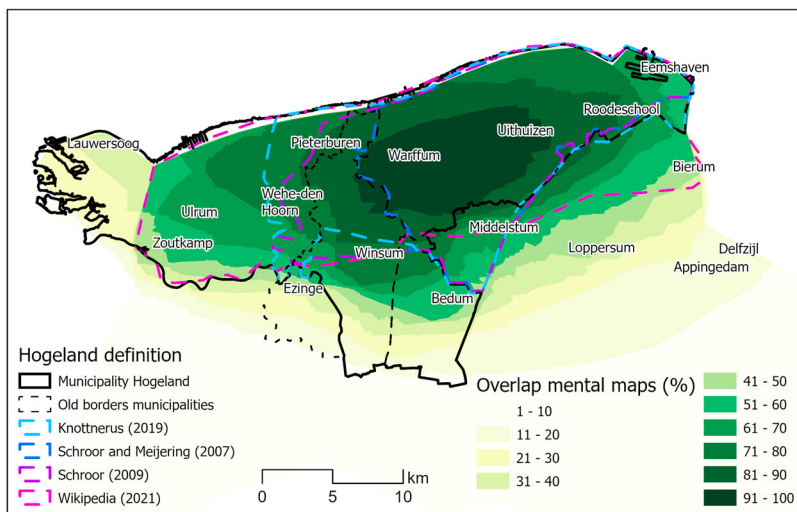


Figure 4. Respondents' territorial associations with the Hogeland region, combined with landscape expert views and the current municipal borders.

compared to 77% in Eemmond and 83% in Winsum). However, a one-way ANOVA test shows that this difference is not statistically significant ($F = 1.711$, $p = 0.183$). The percentage of the mental map areas that are covered by the landscape experts is lowest for De Marne but the within-group difference was significant only for the overlap with the area demarcated by Schroor and Meijering (2007), which is the smallest and most easterly (further away from De Marne) of the expert-drawn boundaries.

On the one hand, the finding that not the complete territory of Het Hogeland is recognized by most respondents in their territorial affinity seems unexpected because of the exposure of the Hogeland name in the discussions leading to the merger, throughout the whole area. On the other hand, the results appear intuitive when considering the vernacular region's fuzzy boundaries, the lack of consensus on the area's boundaries even between landscape experts, and the progressive view of most respondents on what the Hogeland area is, somewhere between the experts' delineations and the wider administrative municipal boundaries. The results could be interpreted as indications that the new municipal boundaries may already have influenced the respondents' territorial associations with the Hogeland name, even though causality is impossible to imply from the dataset.

Respondents' landscape affinity with the Hogeland area

Table 1 shows the respondents' landscape associations with the Hogeland area. Respondents were asked to provide up to four words characterizing the Hogeland landscape. The 169 completed questionnaires resulted in 628 of such associations. We coded these using the 22 landscape elements identified in the regional literature as being characteristic for the Hogeland and sorted them by count. In the questionnaire, the respondents also scored how characteristic each of the 22 landscape elements is for the area, on a five-point-scale.

The most-mentioned landscape characteristic is its large-scale openness (19%). Arable fields (7%), peace and quiet, historical dwelling mounds (terps) and monumental farmhouses follow (6% each). The top five highest-valued landscape elements in the literature-based list of 22 on a five-point-scale were dikes (4.6), trees (4.2), peace and quiet (4.2), arable fields (4.2) and large-scale openness (3.9). Although there seems to be a contradiction between both openness and trees being important, this may be explained by the combination of solitary trees and small bushes surrounding farmhouses, being very visible in the otherwise open landscape.

The respondents' recognition of characteristic landscape elements corresponds to a large degree with the official narrative represented by the municipality's logo (Table 2). No less than 73% of the landscape elements mentioned by respondents also appear on the logo. The mentioned

Table 1. Respondent's landscape associations with the Hogeland area, based on free associations questions, coded into categories according to 22 landscape characteristics that are typical for the Hogeland area as mentioned in the literature.

Landscape element	Count	% Count	Importance*
Large-scale openness	115	19%	3.9
Arable fields	40	7%	4.2
Peace and quiet	38	6%	4.2
Terps	38	6%	3.8
Monumental farmhouses	38	6%	3.7
Dikes	34	6%	4.6
Salt marshes	26	4%	3.8
Winding canals and watercourses	12	2%	3.5
Churches	11	2%	3.7
Hulling and grain mills	11	2%	3.8
Trees	5	1%	4.2
Historical mansions	4	1%	3.8
Modern wind turbines	4	1%	3.0
Brick factories	3	0%	2.7
Bridges	2	0%	3.8
Allotment patterns	1	0%	3.0
Land consolidation forests	1	0%	3.1
Darkness	1	0%	3.5
Straight canals and watercourses	1	0%	2.6
Farm yards	1	0%	3.9
Sluices	1	0%	3.6
Mega stables	0	0%	2.2
Other	228	37%	
None	13	2%	
N	628	100%	157

*Score on a second question how characteristic these elements are for the area's landscape, on a five-point-scale.

Table 2. Overlap between the municipal logo and the landscape elements in the respondents' description of characteristic landscape elements of the area.

Logo component	Landscape element	Sum	Share
Diagonal lines	Wideness, spacious, fields	164	27%
Church building	Dwelling mounds and churches	55	9%
Sail boat	Wadden Sea, harbors, recreation, water	51	8%
Sheep	Animal husbandry	44	7%
Farm buildings	Historical estate houses and stately farms	42	7%
Bird	Dikes and dike remnants, Lauwersoog, sea eagle	35	6%
Trees	Green, nature, national park	24	4%
Small cottages	Workers' cottages and villages	13	2%
Meander	Winding roads and watercourses	12	2%
Old windmill	Windmills	11	2%
Modern windmills	Eemshaven, energy port, new industry	8	1%
Child	Young, growth, dynamism, room for everybody, room for initiatives and games	1	0%
Sun	Sun, horizon and energy	1	0%
Bridge	Cooperation, bridge-building, room for initiatives	0	0%
SUM		460	73%
OTHER		168	27%
TOTAL		628	100%

landscape elements that do not feature on the logo are diverse, with the gist being the area's rurality and peace and quiet.

An interesting explanation is possible for this result. As mentioned, the logo was designed using a 1984 song called 'mien Hogelaand' ('my Hogeland') of Ede Staal. This song is locally well-known and associated with nostalgia and regional identity, which may have contributed to the logo being chosen by the area's residents in an online vote over the alternative, more abstract logo that was the original preference of the mayors and councillors of the previous municipalities. The song was also played during the unveiling of the logo to explain its content.²

Respondents found that the logo represents the area's identity well (3.8 on a 1–5 scale). Furthermore, considering that the municipality's name was chosen by referendum and the alternatives received only minor shares of the votes it is not surprising that the respondents had a relatively positive assessment of how well the new municipality captures the area's identity (3.3). Interestingly, the future-oriented elements that were added to the logo and do not feature in the Ede Staal song scored relatively low. The child symbolizes the municipality's vibrancy with room for young and dynamic families, added in the context of population decline and ageing in municipalities in the northeast of the Netherlands. The wind turbine represents the economic developments in the Eemshaven port. The bridge depicts cooperation and room for new initiatives. Particularly the first two were hardly mentioned by respondents of the questionnaire (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)).

Concluding discussion

Using a case study of the newly amalgamated municipality Het Hogeland (the Netherlands), we studied the institutionalization of socio-cultural and political dimensions of sense of place in an area that reorganized administratively and territorially to counter socio-economic pressure and demographic decline. We found that inter-municipal collaboration was primarily driven by an administrative-jurisdictional logic. The decision to merge was a practical problem-solving solution, following collaboration difficulties and devolution of political powers in the Netherlands. The mobilization of socio-cultural dimensions of sense of place in Het Hogeland, set in motion through naming, music and landscape-inspired branding can, thus, be interpreted as a politically inspired move to give legitimacy to an administrative rationality (an institutional shape, (Paasi 1996)), both to higher political levels (the province) and to the region's inhabitants.

Our results indicate that the municipality's territorial shape (to a certain degree) and its symbolic shape (to a larger degree) were established among the respondents. These corresponded reasonably with the

respondents' sense of place (territory and landscape affinity). Interestingly, the respondents' territorial affinity was quite strong and spatially progressive: although most people interpreted Hogeland to be smaller than the quite large, administrative boundaries of the new municipality, this was still substantially larger than the narrow landscape delineations of landscape experts. Furthermore, especially relevant but not unexpected is that the historically inspired, more traditionalist symbolic shapes that appeal to feelings of nostalgia better matched the respondents' landscape associations than the more modernist, future-oriented ones, which denote more strategic socio-economic objectives and perceived assets of the new municipality (Terlouw 2016). The correspondence between the constructed identity of the region and people's regional consciousness (Paasi 1996) was, thus, partial and mostly related to the 'thick' elements of political identity narratives (Terlouw 2016). These findings signal that respondents either agreed less with the 'thin', forward-looking images or recognized them less as characteristic to the area than the historical references.

Irrespective of the reason for the lower affinity with the future-oriented identity elements, we can conclude that policies that link up political and socio-cultural dimensions of sense of place in a region-building process and back up this strategy with a participatory process involving citizen panels, public polls and civil society input, can bridge the gap between citizen and politics. By tapping into residents' sense of place, local governments can attempt to avoid the danger of a declining democratic nature of local politics, which often occurs with territorial upscaling (Blesse and Roesel 2019; Tavares 2018). Paasi's region-building perspective, which revolves around the interrelated, continuous relations between various institutionalization processes (Paasi 1996), implies that political narratives and regional socio-cultural consciousness are in continuous, mutual interrelation, meaning that there is no linear, hierarchical relation between them. Even though it is impossible to imply causality for this reason, our results for Het Hogeland indicate that such a multi-faceted political and socio-cultural strategy, including participatory and co-constructive actions, will at the minimum not work negatively and possibly could legitimize a territorial-administrative unit. However, as the respondents' limited internalization of the socio-economic symbolism present on the municipal logo indicates, one should be careful to not stretch this conclusion too far, as this is no guarantee for legitimacy of (future) policy actions in terms of content.

Our study that bridged between political and socio-cultural notions of sense of place contributed to the literature on regional identity politics and territorialization by giving voice to and comparing the views of different stakeholders (in)directly involved with and subject to territorial reorganizations. While we acknowledge that the inability to draw causal

relations between the data sources is a limitation of our study, it is likely that it is exactly the observed dynamic interrelations between the political and socio-cultural dimensions of sense of place that contributes to political legitimacy and establishment of regions as broadly accepted administrative entities.

Furthermore, our approach to spatialize and politicize sense of place added a focus on emotional bonds and cognitive transactions between people and place to the literature on regional identity politics and territorialization following neoliberal administrative rationalization policies. This approach is also novel for sense of place research because despite the spatial content of the concept, the role of the spatial environment and the political mobilization of the relation between people and place has remained rather understated (Lewicka 2011). We show how sense of place is both relational and territorial, intrinsically political, in constant motion, and an important component of regional (political) institutionalization processes.

Author contributions

Arie Stoffelen: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Writing; Review and editing. Oscar Kamminga: Questionnaire design; Data gathering; Formal analysis; Review and editing. Peter Groote: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Writing; Review and editing. Erik Meijles: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Writing; Review and editing. Gerd Weitkamp: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Visualization; Writing; Review and editing; Aline Hoving: Questionnaire design; Data gathering; Review and editing.

Notes

1. 'Laand en lucht, ain wiede vlucht, zicht zunner zwetten, wènstig bie zetten' (Schroor 2009, 9).
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sagrjAyMhUUandt=>

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the pupils of the 2019–2020 classes 3 VWO of the Hogeland College in Warffum and the respondents of the study. The GIS datasets of borders of the landscape types and the vernacular regions of the Hogeland were kindly provided by the Centre for Landscape Studies, University of Groningen.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Arie Stoffelen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2000-5493>
 Peter Grootte  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9642-4013>
 Erik Meijles  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8738-1907>
 Gerd Weitkamp  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7367-8467>

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