

Trauma, place, and transformation

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Abstract

This commentary comprises three different responses to Counted and Zock's article: "Place Spirituality: An Attachment Perspective." The first response is from Esther Sternberg, MD, who gives a psychophysiological and neuroscience critique. The second is from Altaf Engineer, PhD, from the perspective of architecture and environmental psychology, and the last response is from Hester Oberman, PhD, who gives a psychology of religion rebuttal.

Keywords

Attachment object, conditional place preference, emergence, environmental psychology, human geography, place attachment, place spirituality, surrogate attachment, transformation, trauma

Commentary on "Place Spirituality: An Attachment Perspective" by Authors: Victor Counted and Hetty Zock

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The article by Counted and Zock presents an interesting and compelling argument for the spirituality of place based on attachment theory. While most of their points are drawn from human psychology, there are aspects of attachment to place not covered in this article, based on animal and human behavior studies, which may inform the biological underpinnings of the phenomenon. Specifically, conditioned place preference is a well-studied phenomenon in animals, which also applies to human situations. Animal studies obviously do not address the spiritual aspects of place, but could explain learned preferences for certain places and even learned preferences for some elements of those places, and the strong subconscious positive and negative emotional bonds to a place that develop as well.

Classic conditioning studies in mammals, including humans and rodents, have shown that mammals can be conditioned to associate place and elements of place with reward or punishment. These

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associations between the physical world and emotional responses, once formed, can be strong triggers of emotional responses when the individual or animal is re-exposed to similar places or similar elements of places they have experienced previously, particularly if the initial association has occurred in the context of extreme emotions, such as fear or desire. Indeed, such associations become hard-wired, and form the basis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, and drug addiction relapses in humans (Pizzimenti, Navis, & Lattal, 2017). A long history of studies in the pharmacology literature shows that rodents learn to prefer a test chamber if repeatedly presented in it with food, water, addictive drugs (e.g. alcohol, morphine), or if male rats are presented with a female rat in that chamber. These rodents even learn to associate the specifics of the place with this preference, down to the texture on the floor, color of the walls, lighting, and so on. Similarly, rats can be conditioned to reject that chamber or elements of it if repeatedly shocked when they enter it. Indeed, such conditioned place preference is thought to occur in human addiction, where certain places or elements of those places can trigger relapse and a downward spiral when the person re-enters the place. Hence the effectiveness in addiction treatment of removing the addict from the place where they became addicted (Childs & de Wit, 2016; Valyear, Villaruel, & Chaudhri, 2017).

This phenomenon parallels the authors' description of that in Morgan (2010) from Counted and Zock research, proposing that early memories are "generalized into unconscious working models of place" which later manifest subjectively as a long-term positively affected bond to place, known as "place attachment."

In my discussion of the biological impacts of Lourdes (Sternberg, 2009), I raise the possibility that in addition to the spiritual mechanisms of belief, biological mechanisms may also enhance the healing effects of such places, through positive associations of place with positive emotions. This is what is otherwise known as the placebo effect. While the word placebo is often dismissed, it is in fact a very powerful effect and can be viewed as the brain's own healing mechanism (Wager & Atlas, 2015; Wager et al., 2004; Zubieta et al., 2001).

One of the most powerful emotions that I observed at Lourdes, which permeated the place in an almost infectious way, was the loving support shown to the pilgrim patients by their families and loved ones, the Lourdes clergy and hospital staff, and indeed, even by strangers. This speaks to the beneficial biological effects of social interactions and loving relationships in physical and emotional healing. If an individual learns to associate a place such as Lourdes and elements of it with love, then this learned association could indeed counter the negative effects of stress on illness every time the person experiences the place. Stress is known to exacerbate illness through stress hormones and neuronal pathways that suppress the immune system's ability to fight infection, heal wounds, fight cancer, and slow chromosomal aging (Marques-Deak, Cizza, & Sternberg, 2005; Sternberg, 2006). Positive loving relationships counter these negative effects of stress, as does placebo belief, and help healing processes both by reducing the stress response and by activating positive brain pathways, including dopamine reward and opioid anti-pain pathways—all important in boosting the immune system. It is conceivable that such biological mechanisms may occur in place spirituality. The place attachment proposed by Counted and Zock could activate such pathways, thereby enhancing place spirituality's beneficial effects.

While these biological underpinnings of place associations with both positive and negative emotional responses do occur and are learned, and become hard-wired and subconscious, they do not explain all aspects of place spirituality. Certainly animal studies cannot address the spiritual aspects of such connections. Suggesting that there may be biological components to different aspects of place spirituality does not diminish Counted and Zock's well-supported theories of attachment as its basis, but rather may provide some biological context to help explain the profound associations and emotions that individuals experience in such places, and the potential mechanisms such places might have on enhancing healing of all sorts.

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Place and attachment. We form cognitive and emotional attachments to social and physical environments that give us a sense of belonging and freedom, and provide feelings of security and self-identity; a phenomenon referred to as place attachment in environmental psychology (Gifford, 2014; Kopec, 2012). In the section on place and attachment in this article, the authors look at the phenomenon in the context of place spirituality. They discuss it in detail by drawing from existing research in the fields of environmental psychology and human geography.

The authors, in their discussion on place and attachment, specify how place spirituality could be experienced by attachment to non-religious objects in a place instead of, or in addition to, attachment to God. They explain how adults can be attached to a place through different patterns: its people, its architectural design, or by assigning it different meanings to reinforce feelings of support, security, and protection. They also graphically present some of these ideas in Figures 1: Circle of Spirituality and 2: The Circle of Place Spirituality. Other intriguing ideas discussed in this section include how places can represent safe havens and refuge (Scannell & Gifford, 2017), the role of natural and physical qualities of a place in stimulating proximity-seeking behaviors (Counted, 2016), how environmental and social qualities of a place responds to one's psychological needs, being attached to a place without ever having experienced it or being physically present in it through "place visualization" (Scannell & Gifford, 2017), and experiencing a place through a frame of childhood memories (Manzo, 2003; Morgan, 2010).

It would be good to know more about the authors' search strategy for this literature review: how important research in the field of place and attachment in the context of place spirituality was identified, which papers were excluded, and what were the criteria. In this regard, a more systematic comparative analysis of key papers in place and attachment theories would have added more rigor to the study. Kopec (2012), for example, evaluates place attachment from four different perspectives: psychological needs, monetary value, amenities or attributes, and specific functionality.

Some additional questions about this section include the following:

- The authors emphasize how place spirituality can be experienced through an attachment to the place or through non-religious objects and feelings or attachment to the divine; however, is there any evidence as to whether place spirituality is more strongly experienced by a combination of two or more of these types of attachments?
- Could these different types of attachments be part of the "hybrid image" proposed by the authors in the last paragraph of this section, in which they discuss childhood memories of a place?

Greater place attachment is also known to be associated with the ease of controlling one's privacy, freedom, or self-identity in that place. For example, older teenagers move out of their homes earlier if they have less privacy, and tenants move out of properties quicker if they get less privacy associated with environmental factors such as visual exposure or noise (Kopec, 2012). A graphic representation of these ideas, showing different types of place attachments and their different levels of attachment and their interactions, would further support and strengthen this discussion.

While the goal of this article is not to focus on any particular type of place, there is much scope to analyze "third places" in the context of spirituality in future studies. Research on place and attachment could potentially include the role of "third places," defined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (2001) as places of refuge for relaxation and socialization beyond the home (first place)

and work (second place) where people can regularly commune with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers. These types of spaces—coffee shops being one example—are welcoming and facilitate creative forms of community interaction. They may inspire comfort in times of collective grief, such as the period after the Paris attacks of November 2015 described in the introductory section of the article. This subject would be a good fit for the next study, especially since the authors, in the second paragraph of this section, state that the actions of an individual or community spatially come together to create the concept of a place.

The discussion on place and attachment in this article raises questions and challenges, and inspires new ideas on the subject. Overall, it has content that is well written and academically rigorous, revealing the authors' thorough understanding of current discussions and knowledge in the field. They describe how place attachment can make people feel safe and secure, and promote healing in times of uncertainty, disruption, or war by presenting new perspectives and revealing exciting possibilities for future research in the area.

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Pray even if you do not believe in God: trauma, place, and transformation. In "Place Spirituality: An Attachment Perspective," Victor Counted and Hetty Zock introduce an understanding of place spirituality (PS) as a possible relationship between a place and attachment to a divine entity or sacred object (i.e. attachment theory). Thus, the authors define PS as an attachment bond established between an individual, a place, and a religious object of attachment. Two phenomena cited to support their argument include spontaneous public singing and an unexpected urge to pray (for religious and non-religious individuals alike)—both of which occurred in the wake of the November 2015 Paris terror attacks. The authors use the 2015 attacks to contextualize their interpretation of PS as the transformation of a non-spiritual geographic location to a sacred place by virtue of trauma. The attachment to place, Counted and Zock theorize, can be understood as "the byproduct of an emotional attachment to God".

In other words, place becomes secondary to the spiritual presence individuals experience after a disruptive event. Problematically, Counted and Zock make no distinction between those who identify as spiritual and those who do not, implying that both can experience similar PS through a chain of attachment transactions. Using a relational paradigm, attachment to God is not learned, but "shaped in the course of one's developmental processes and references to relational experiences with the self, a religious figure, and close others (Kirkpatrick, 1994, 1995, 2005)". Spirituality then becomes an expression of a "surrogate attachment," a coping mechanism for appraising stressors and interpersonal struggles. More so, the internal working model (IWM) necessitates an unconscious psychological framework that presupposes a god concept. Such an attachment transaction would rely on a pre-existing "attachment object" that is ultimately transformed to a God representation as per Counted and Zock, or spiritual modeling processes based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 2003; Oman et al., 2009). Thus, the question stands, can this theory hold true for atheists and religious people alike, even if the former have no such pre-existing spiritual modeling connection?

The authors highlight the relevance of place and how it can facilitate devotion to the sacred. Sternberg expands on Kirkpatrick's psycho-biological connection by adding that neurophysiological mechanisms also play a role in the perceived healing effects of place, and Engineer makes connections with the current research findings in architecture, environmental psychology, and human geography. Psychology of religion and spirituality is moving toward an inclusive understanding of religious belief as a complex, dynamic system combining multiple paradigms such as biology, (epi)genetics, and (personality) psychology. The relevance of atheism and non-belief is

included as an integral part of examining belief in the context of cognitive and personality variables (Caldwell-Harris, 2012; Saroglou, 2010, 2014; Zuckerman, 2009). Although this account of PS is well-developed for an individual with a knowledge of God (Davis, Moriarty, & Mauch, 2013)—a knowledge either developed through one’s personal identification as spiritual or influenced by a cultural-religious environment—this model *presupposes* one’s prior knowledge of a god, divinity, or spirituality in some form, spiritual models, or intra-individual factors (Bandura, 1986). That is, a believer assumes a divine entity as the role of an attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990), yet how a non-believer would do the same is not addressed. The concept of “attachment surrogate” as a compensation model presupposes a prior connection and does not explain the capacity for the spontaneous spiritual expressions of PS experience—public singing and compulsion to prayer—for an atheist (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The problem is that in the absence of a religious or spiritual tradition, there is nothing to serve in the attachment history which would transfer onto the place and manifest PS.

Counted and Zock are right to want to better understand the psychological mechanisms of PS and to highlight its significance within attachment theory. The authors connect PS to a transactional chain of attachment to God (for those who believe or have the capacity to transform a previous attachment in childhood into surrogate God). However, the poignant example the authors use to introduce PS does not exemplify this. Victoria Setga is a Parisian living in France—a country known for its strong commitment to secularism (*laïcité*)—who self-identifies as someone who does not believe in God, and yet, in the face of terror, she prays. Bowlby’s attachment theory falls short in offering a framework to understand this phenomenon. A better way to explain such spontaneous religious expression in a moment of crisis by individuals with no conscious, pre-existing religious framework is with the concept of *emergence*.

Emergence stands between two scientific traditions used to understand spirituality—that of dualism (spirit as separate from the body) and reductionism, in which complex phenomena are explained by appealing to simpler, more basic ones. Emergence provides a third type of understanding where new entities can emerge from the organization and interaction of the elements composing a system (Belzen and Hood, 2006; Brown, 2009; Jeeves & Brown, 2009). This offers a framework that can account for a novel experience arising in an unexpected situation—such as *praying to God* in spite of one’s self-asserted non-belief. Something new emerges from the initial failure of the individual’s existing epistemic framework in the wake of trauma, where the etiology of religious expression cannot be found in prior life experiences. Spirituality is an emergent property that cannot be explained solely through prior attachments. An emergence theory can enhance a more retrogressive theory and provide a complimentary framework alongside it. Emergentism can help explain the complexity of the emotional meaning-making process underlying PS experiences.

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