

Place-Based Strengths: Review & Assessment



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Background

People can become attached to specific places or nature more broadly. Although different aspects of this have received attention in environmental psychology and related fields, there has been little effort to organize some of the key constructs.

Objective

This presentation will review key place-based strengths and how they are usually defined and operationalized in empirical research.

Methods

Google Scholar was searched for empirical literature on “attachment to place,” “connectedness to nature,” and “spatial justice.” Inclusion criteria included that papers had to present quantitative data.

Definitions and measures were extracted from papers in order to better define boundaries around concepts.

Place-based strengths such as attachment to place, connectedness to nature, and spatial justice are essential constructs that could advance research on resilience and prevention.

Results

Attachment to place

Attachment to place is one of the most researched place-based strengths. Place attachment refers to a positive emotional connection with a specific place that has significant value.

The biggest challenges we found related to this concept is that the definition often overlaps with *connectedness to nature*, especially when you examine survey items used to assess it.

Some researchers focus on whether a place has utility or some attributes that fulfill needs such as recreation, others focus more on sentimental attachments as to one’s hometown.

We conclude that to distinguish from general connectedness to nature, the personal meaning should be clear.

Example questions:

My hometown is my favorite place to be (Gosling & Williams, 2010).

This place is fundamental to my people and significant to my community (Cundill et al., 2017).

I feel at home when I’m in this place (Lai & Kreuter, 2012).

Connectedness to nature

In contrast to *attachment to place*, *connectedness to nature* describes the general love of and positive feelings for the natural environment (not their hometown or other specific location) (Dutcher et al., 2007).

Connectedness to nature is an affinity which individuals feel that nature and people are from the same community—that they are both a part of the natural world. To some, this connectedness means that nature can be regarded as the extension of cognitive representation of self.

As noted above, the biggest definitional challenge is that this is sometimes confounded with feelings about home.

Fortunately, we found some qualitative examples to demonstrate this idea of connectedness to nature.

Example questions:

I always feel a personal bond with things in my natural surroundings like trees, wildlife or the view on the horizon (Gosling & Williams, 2010).

I feel a deep feeling of oneness with the natural environment world (Raymond, Brown, & Weber, 2010).

Spatial justice

Spatial justice brings a geographic dimension to considerations of social justice (for example, food deserts).

Spatial justice refers to the fair geographic distribution of social resources. In the context of human living places, spatial justice can be accomplished by implementing strategies in a dwelling area to ensure that everyone has the equal opportunity to achieve well-being.

Spatial justice implies the regard of fundamental human rights for all people within the society. It also emphasizes the advancement of comprehensive spatial progress in order to reduce economic divergence and social inequality (Usmani & Jamal, 2013).

Example questions:

In what ways do interactions of bodies, space, materiality, time, discourse, and power shift when intentional changes are made to the place?

(Uwayezu & De Vries, 2018).

In what ways are space, power, and bodies interacting in this “place” (e.g., in the University of the South, in Franklin County, and in the larger region)?

(Uwayezu & De Vries, 2018).

Conclusions

There are several well-established strengths that are connected to geographic location in some way. Everything happens in a place. Mainstream psychology often ignores the impact of geography or environment on many psychosocial processes, but more attention to place has potential for improving work on resilience, prevention, and other psychological topics.

Limitations include the overlapping ways that many of these constructs have been defined in the literature and a lack of an overarching theoretical framework. Our search may have missed relevant items.

Future work should continue working on developing an internally consistent framework and connecting to other areas of psychology.

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