

A space of transition and transaction: A rejoinder to selected commentaries on place spirituality

Archive for the Psychology of Religion
2019, Vol. 41(1) 43–52
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DOI: 10.1177/0084672419832673
journals.sagepub.com/home/prj

**Victor Counted** 

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands; Western Sydney University, Australia

Fraser Watts

University of Lincoln, UK

Abstract

This rejoinder acknowledges the empirical gaps and theoretical/theological disharmony highlighted in the three selected commentaries on *Place Spirituality* (PS), but we defend our central argument about the developmental pathways of PS. First, we provide an overview of recent studies on PS, highlighting what has been done so far in the field. Second, we draw from the commentaries to advance the understanding of PS in relation to three world religions: Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. Third, we evaluate the normative aspects of PS as a transactional versus transitional phenomenon. Finally, we defend the two contested developmental pathways to PS, involving the compensation and correspondence working models of attachment, while complementing these models using the motivational systems framework. We maintain that these models are relevant for understanding the relationship between religious attachment and place attachment among religious and non-religious people. Recommendations for further studies are made in relation to the broader implications of PS.

Keywords

Attachment theory, attachment to God, place attachment, Place Spirituality, rejoinder

We enjoyed reading the commentaries because they looked at Place Spirituality (PS) from various different perspectives (e.g. Basu, 2019; Latifa, Hidayat, & Sodiq, 2019; Sternberg, Engineer, & Oberman, 2019). The diversity of their approaches was enriching and complementary to our own (Counted & Zock, 2019). While there were many similarities to our approaches, the authors'

Corresponding author:

Victor Counted, School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia.

Email: connect@victorcounted.org

nanced and thoughtful commentaries on our work add a depth for which we are grateful. In particular, they offer fresh insights into the phenomena of PS in Islam (Latifa, Hidayat, & Sodiq), and Hinduism (Basu), and complement our Judeo-Christian approach to PS (e.g. Counted, 2019; Counted, Possamai, McAuliffe, & Meade, 2018; Counted & Watts, 2017). The willingness of these scholars to take the time to grapple with the arguments in our work is gratifying. Their contributions have helped us to clarify our own thinking on the topic; we hope that, together with our response, these discussions will help other scholars to develop a more insightful and holistic analysis of PS.

PS: an overview

PS is a concept used to describe the psychological mechanism involving the intersection of place and spiritual attachment, so that these experiences become two aspects of one journey (Watts, in press). In the target article, we conceptualised PS experience as the attachment bonds established between the individual, a place, and a religious figure/object (Counted & Zock, 2019). Given that place is a multidimensional construct, PS researchers are encouraged to conceptualise the locus of one's place of attachment. This involves the physical elements or environmental ensemble, activities or people-in-place, and the identity of a place - also referred to as *genius loci* (common presence) (Counted, 2016; Seamon, 2014, 2018). Scannell and Gifford (2010) and Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) offer different variations of the concept of place. Understanding the complexity of place domains is important in order to understand the processes of PS, as it is necessary to understand the kind of place to which the individual is drawn. For example, the identity/lifestyle of a particular place, resources and activities in a place, or the physical elements of a place would be expected to activate attachment (to God) differently.

Objects of attachment in the form of a geographic setting and a divine entity have played a role in the lives of humans, both historically and in contemporary life. Historically, the phenomenon of PS is recorded throughout Jewish history and the Christian Bible (Counted & Watts, 2017). These historical accounts suggest that the link between religious and place attachments is an ancient phenomenon, one that is the basis of Judeo-Christian theology, as seen in both the Old and New Testaments (Counted & Watts, 2017).

The link between place attachment and spirituality has been established in recent empirical studies, though most of these focus only on the normative roles of attachment processes in PS (e.g. Brulin, Laurin, Hill, Mikulincer, & Granqvist, 2018; Counted, in press; Counted et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2018a, 2018b; Kamitsis & Francis, 2013; Kupor, Laurin, & Levav, 2015; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). For example, the role of religious attachment in the wake of disaster in a particular geographic place has been explored in a recent longitudinal study on PS (Davis et al., 2018a, 2018b). Survivors of the 2016 Louisiana flood consistently sought spiritual attachment to God as they struggled to cope with the realities of a negative place event. Such spiritual attachment in the face of a perceived danger in a significant place served as a coping mechanism, as individuals turned to religion to compensate for their loss of attachment to place. The results from the study conceptually support the PS model and its application in a post-disaster context. Experimental research on PS comparing results in a secular place context (Sweden) versus a religious place context (the United States) show that the link between place and attachment to God is context-driven (Brulin et al., 2018). Although the authors found that place (i.e. welfare state or resources of a place) and God serve as alternate security systems, individuals in a secular place context did not turn to God when exposed to risk-taking and danger (Brulin et al., 2018) as much as highly religious individuals in a religious place context who were found in another study to turn to God when exposed to danger (Kupor et al., 2015).

Empirical studies on migrant populations show evidence for PS as a context-driven phenomenon (Counted, *in press*; Counted et al., 2018). For example, in a recent study with African migrants in a secular Dutch society, attachment to God had a moderating effect on the link between negative place experiences and sense of place, in that migrants had increased place attachment, despite their experiences of racial discrimination, due to their sense of spiritual attachment (Counted, *in press*). There was no significant relationship between place attachment and spiritual attachment among migrants in a multicultural Australian society, even when tested for the interaction effects on quality of life (Counted et al., 2018). It was found that attachment to Australia and attachment to God predicted quality-of-life outcomes independently rather than collectively. While the lack of interaction effect was attributed to the dissimilarity in the two relational domains (place and religion), there are reasons to believe that the results are influenced by the place contexts to which individuals are drawn, and the meaning they attribute to those contexts.

In terms of theoretical contributions, and aside from the attachment perspective offered in the target article (Counted & Zock, 2019), we have proposed a motivational systems approach to PS elsewhere (Counted, 2018). The motivational systems approach is a sequel to the attachment perspective, as it provides a psychoanalytic insight into how PS works. This approach to PS has been critiqued by Brulin and Granqvist (2018), who raised conceptual concerns regarding attachment to place as a representation of adult attachment behaviour. Brulin and Granqvist may have missed the point of the PS model, which emphasises that humans, unlike animals, are able to create artificial ways of finding safety. They do this by activating the same neural pathways to satisfy their needs. That is, religion, place, drugs, and sex all co-opt predetermined motivational systems. It seems right to say that God is a created source of security in the same way that places serve as places of safety. In times of need, people go home, for example. Brulin and Granqvist are astute in pointing out that it is unclear whether we are attached to a place, or whether the place has been associated with some person who provided us with a sense of safety. Philosophical literature can illuminate how places can be meaningful anthropomorphised domains of attachment (Gildersleeve & Crowden, 2018, *in press*).

The biological underpinnings of place attachment, and both the positive and negative emotional responses to place (Sternberg et al., 2019), can help us to gain insight into the nature of place as an important object of attachment. Other theoretical perspectives, such as the self-ecological framework (Kamitsis & Francis, 2013), have been used to position spirituality as a correlate of place (nature) connectedness and a mediator of the relationship between place connectedness and psychological well-being. Elsewhere, we found that a sense of place connectedness is a mediator in the religiousness-life satisfaction link in a nationwide sample of Australians in urban and rural areas, and these mediation effects were strongest in participants who reported living in urban metropolitan cities, thus affirming the contention that the variation in PS is context-driven (Counted, Jonason, Possamai, & Meade, *in press*).

Taken together, the above-mentioned studies show that spiritual journeys do not operate in a vacuum. PS happens within the context of a particular place and is activated in response to experiencing one's environment and/or religious figure either positively or negatively.

PS and world religions

The commentaries shed some light on how PS can be understood in relation to world religions, particularly Hinduism and Islam. We will comment on the commentaries while drawing some conclusions on PS and world religions, without taking away from the rich religious perspectives that have been offered.

Hinduism

Basu's (2019) commentary illuminates the underlying features of PS in Hinduism, which is presented as a transitional space where 'the self can give free rein to imagination'. Although place attachment can be an imagined experience in Hinduism, it enables the religious believer to practice deeper detachment—a cherished state of mind—in order to attain a complete unification with a Divine entity or the sacred (Basu, 2019). This synchronicity is one that is achieved through rigorous training exercises and affective-cognitive practices that involve, but are not limited to, place visualisation. Drawing on the work of Ghosh (1950), Busi narrates how the mystic saint Shri Caitanya had a strong sense of attachment to Vrindaban (the home of Krishna and Radha), a place he never visited, through visualising it. This attachment to place had spiritual significance and meaning for him as he recounted his love for his Divine entity Krishna and his consort Radha. In Hinduism, there is a strong sense of attachment to place as a sacred transitional space. This attachment to an imagined sacred place becomes a locus of control for the individual in terms of nurturing their spiritual attachment to Krishna, and maintaining their social life with family and friends. Place attachment is the underlying building block of the PS experience in Hinduism, thus enabling the faithful to detach from their immediate environment to connect with the sacred and close others as a pathway to self-actualisation.

The Judeo-Christian tradition

The journey of the Israelites marked the genesis of the experience of PS in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It started with Abraham, who left his country for a place that he believed Jehovah (God) would show him. He ended up in a new country and decided to settle there, though still attached to the idea of a Land, which Jehovah promised to give him and his descendants. Abraham's generation held on to the hope of reaching a Promised Land flowing with *milk* and *honey*. This story sets the tone for the PS experience in the Bible, showing how the Israelites encountered God as they wandered from country to country in search of the Promised Land of Canaan. In the New Testament, Jesus appears on the scene as a descendant of Abraham, proclaiming the Gospel as the son of God, sent to save the world from sin. After 33 years of earthly sojourn, Jesus died and was buried in Jerusalem, leaving the spirit of God in the hearts of people who follow him. Although Jerusalem is an important place for Christians, place attachment transcends attachment to any particular geographic place in the Christian tradition. Instead, it involves attachment to the third person of the Godhead (Holy Spirit), one who dwells inside believers and witnesses with their embodied spirit as an advocator and helper (Counted & Watts, 2017). PS in the Christian perspective takes a subjective turn to proximity to God 'on the inside' through the death and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, rather than to a particular geographic place. This perspective also overlaps with the Islamic perspective (Latifa et al., 2019).

Islam

There are overlaps between the Christian and Islamic perspectives on PS, especially at the third level of the Muslim spiritual path (*ma'rifa* or spiritual consciousness) where the 'understanding of and connection to God might be enhanced, and the experience of connecting with God can be [at] every place at every time' (Latifa et al., 2019). The first level of the spiritual path to which PS is important is the *Sharia* (conceptual knowledge), which is where the Muslim faithful seek and maintain attachment to God through rigorous religious involvement (e.g. prayer, fasting, the Qur'an, Hajj). This spiritual attachment, however, must be maintained in a sacred place, facing

towards Ka'ba, where the Muslim is required to remember Allah. Although place may be helpful in terms of nurturing one's relationship with Allah, this may not be necessary as one grows in faith, into the second level of spiritual growth, *Tariqa* (experiential knowledge), which requires improvement in the quality of one's spiritual attachment. However, to attain this level requires a strong knowledge of Sharia, which prepares the individual towards purification of the heart through *Dhikr* (religious rituals). On the *Tariqa* and *Ma'rifa* spiritual paths, place attachment is not required in order to experience spiritual consciousness, since place, at this point, is purely internal, thus collapsing the distance between the Muslim faithful and Allah (Latifa et al., 2019). Hence, the physicality of place may become less important for Muslims in practising their faith, especially in the third dimension. Latifa and colleagues noted that spiritual struggles that are factored within the PS model are not a perfect fit within the Islamic framework. For example, insecure attachment patterns that serve as examples of spiritual struggles in the attachment–religion framework (e.g. avoidance or anxiety in a relationship with God) are not encouraged (Miner et al., 2014). Hence, spiritual struggles may be a weak predictor of PS from an Islamic perspective, in that Muslim faithfuls may not be predisposed to alternative relationships even when they are experiencing attachment insecurity with Allah.

PS and individual differences

Basu (2019) comments on the ambiguities associated with PS developmental pathways, stressing the need for more clarity. While we still defend the value of the compensation and correspondence models, we refer readers to a published sequel addressing the limitations of attachment theory in relation to PS, which offers a psychoanalytic interpretation using motivational systems theory (Counted, 2018). We draw on this sequel to address some of the developmental issues raised by both Basu (2019) and Sternberg et al. (2019). This is partly because attachment theory is limited in terms of understanding PS dynamics. The motivational systems approach allows us to understand how and why attachment is formed with multiple objects simultaneously in PS. Another reason why we developed this alternative model is because the interactions within the PS chain are controlled by several motivational and intersubjective drives such as intentions, security, motives, beliefs, emotions, feelings, opinions, impressions and needs. The experience of PS goes beyond the need for attachment and is largely based on the individual's subjectivity (Counted, 2018). To address the concerns raised on the PS psychological pathways (Basu, 2019) and the religious/non-religious discourse (Sternberg et al., 2019), we will expand the compensation and correspondence attachment pathways in order to integrate two motivational systems models adapted from Lichtenberg (1988, 1989): attachment-affiliation and exploratory-assertion (Counted, 2018). This PS motivational model was developed because there is a high probability that attached individuals will be drawn to more than one object of attachment simultaneously, depending on the drives that influence which motivational system (e.g. attachment-affiliation vs. exploratory-assertion) is activated at a particular time. Elsewhere, we referred to this drive as the desire for subjectivity, accounting for the self-referential drivers of people's place context, which triggered the desire to form attachment (Counted, 2018). Intersubjective desires are innate motivational systems that are essential for human survival and have been conceptualised as radical human relationality (Lichtenberg, 1988, 1989; Stern, 2004). Hence, due to their intersubjective desires, attached individuals are likely to activate their motivational systems in the process of experiencing objects of attachment.

Correspondence exploratory motivation is activated by the intention and curiosity to *explore* a relationship with an object of attachment, even though the attached individual may be in a healthy relationship elsewhere. Here, the individual seeks to master their broader environment and explore the potential of a particular object of attachment based on the security with another (secure base),

thus having the function of exploration curiosity. However, individuals in unhealthy relationships may also explore a surrogate object depending on their emotions, needs, opinions about the object, or curiosity (Counted, 2018). Drawing on the example used in the target article about the Paris terror attack in 2015 (Counted & Zock, 2019), we will explain how the example may be relevant for the correspondence model since this has been queried by Basu (2019). In this instance, the terror attack should not have happened. If the attack had never occurred and the residents had been exploring religious activities (e.g. singing spiritual songs, praying), then the storyline would have been a better fit for the correspondence model of PS. This would then have meant that the Paris residents had maintained their place attachment, while at the same time turning to prayer and spiritual songs for enhanced security. The model thus depends on the situation and sequence of events.

Compensation attachment motivation is activated by the need for *attachment* when the individual is in distress and exposed to negative emotions or experiences threatening their relationships (e.g. with a caregiver, Divine entity, geographic place, romantic partner, etc.). In other words, the attached individual compensates for an *unhealthy* relationship by affiliating themselves with a safe haven (Counted, 2018). The example of the Paris terror attack in 2015 used in the target article helps us to understand the compensation model since the residents turned to spiritual songs and prayers in the aftermath of a negative place event. Although Basu's 'person to spirituality via the place' phrase summarises the PS compensation attachment, this experience does not necessarily require a direct experience with a particular place, nor does it have to start from the domain of place alone. The account of the Syrian refugees mentioned in the target article is a good example of this. Most of the refugees were drawn to Western European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, even though they had not had a direct experience with, or physically been to, those places (Cherson, 2015). However, one can also argue that the negative place events in their home countries may have triggered their need for attachment to other countries, even though they had not been to those new countries. This is supported by both empirical and theoretical evidence which show that attachment to place can occur through visualising a place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) and through engaging with any of the place domains (Counted, 2016, 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Therefore, PS compensation attachment can start from either the domain of spiritual struggles or that of negative place experiences/events. Individuals with spiritual struggles (e.g. a sense of God abandonment) may turn to activities in a place (or visualise one for themselves) for meaning-making, in the same way as those exposed to negative place experiences (e.g. racial discrimination, anxiety about the future, war conflicts, forced displacement) may turn to religion for security (Davis et al., 2018a, 2018b).

In responding to the concerns raised by Sternberg and colleagues about the religious/non-religious divide, we believe that the PS psychological pathways are also relevant for those who identify themselves as non-religious or secular. Granqvist, Fransson, and Hagekull (2009) explored this aspect of attachment in New Age spiritualities, suggesting that the attachment–religion framework is not limited to a particular established religion. We are all connected to something or someone sacred to us, either directly or indirectly. The sacred connotes an idea of *non-negotiable beliefs*, which is as applicable to secular as it is to religious groups (Francis, 2015). People are drawn to nature as the sacred, and some develop attachment to romantic partners as a way of unification with the inner self, while many are drawn to human idols whom they adore and reverence as a god (Berkes, 2018; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Thomson, 2006). In fact, Marzoni (2018) conceptualised academia as a religious cult. As academics, we are likely to be drawn to our work and to see it as sacrosanct; it gives us a sense of identity—it is who we are. And for some, the perks and prestige of academia may be their secure base and safety net.

We all believe in something/someone sacred and sacrosanct to us. It can be a place, our work, nature, loved ones, a particular person, a faith community, a religious figure, a particular place,

religious buildings, and so on. In order to understand how PS can be interpreted among non-religious participants, the starting point would be to ask what is sacred and sacrosanct to the secular/non-religious person, what the imagined sense of attachment is that assures them a sense of identity, security, and individual growth. This imagined attachment provides a kind of placebo effect in which both religious and non-religious individuals become conditioned to associate with an idea, a group, a person, a place or a religious figure. Such a sense of connectedness forms strong emotional connections that enhance the attachment effects of these bonds, thus forming what Sternberg and colleagues refer to as ‘the brain’s own healing mechanism’.

PS and emergentism

Furthermore, while we appreciate the recommendation by Sternberg and colleagues to integrate the concept of *emergence* into the PS model, we believe that the two psychological pathways discussed above have clarified the developmental stages related to PS. Although Victoria Setga in the target article responded to the terror attack by supposedly turning to prayer, we do not know who/what she might be praying to. Hence, it would be wrong to assume that she was praying to a particular Divine entity. What if her understanding of prayer takes the form of submerging herself into her work, or turning to nature, her inner self, or having a time of meditation with nature? The starting point for analysing PS should be to understand what the sacred means to the attached individual or analysand. For example, it is misleading to conclude that a non-believer is drawn to a Christian God because he or she chooses to pray. Spiritual attachment is a relative concept that ought to be interpreted in terms of the language game of the analysand. While we referred to some Paris residents (e.g. Victoria Setga) turning to prayer and singing spiritual songs, we never mentioned that they sang or prayed to any particular type of divine entity, especially since they sang ‘Let It Be’ by a rock band, The Beatles. However, since the lyrics of the song refer to ‘Mother Mary’ coming to one’s aid, one could argue that the residents were turning to a Christian religious figure after the terror attack in their place of attachment. In this instance, their attachment history might be tied to Paris itself and to people in that place (e.g. parents, family, friends), and not necessarily to Mother Mary.

Some studies have shown substantial evidence of religious change in non-believers who turned to God as an attachment figure based on their relationships with important people in their lives (Counted, 2016a, 2016b; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998). Although *emergentism* gives appropriate weight to studying PS among non-believers, we have little sympathy with this framework because of structural and conceptual issues (e.g. ‘downward’ causation, experiential/non-experiential divide) (Kim, 2006; Madden, 2013). However, we do not want to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’ since PS may have emergent properties of some system which are not explained by attachment processes. Despite the issues associated with the use of *emergentism* (Kim, 2006; Madden, 2013), we would encourage Sternberg and colleagues to develop this framework further to complement our PS model.

PS and normative processes

Basu (2019) questions whether PS can be conceptualised as a transactional process, and provides insights into how and why PS is a transitional space. We believe that PS is a space of both transition and transaction. It is a transitional phenomenon because the attached individual is transforming the nature of their inner self in relation to an imagined locus (Basu, 2019). Individuals engaging in PS within this transitional space are drawn to objects of attachment simultaneously, through either the correspondence or the compensation pathway, thus serving

as a safe haven and secure base for their set goals. The function of PS as a transitional space goes beyond the periphery of security-seeking, and includes the need for identity formation within the context of an imagined relationship with objects of attachment. This is reflected in the place identity and/or religious identity the individual embodies as a subject of a transitional space. This hybrid identity is nurtured by virtue of individual differences in seeking attachment with surrogate objects, within the immediate and broader transitional space. In this context, the 'place imbued by spirituality may be conceptualized as a transitional space, where the self can give free rein to imagination' (Basu, 2019).

As a transactional phenomenon, the focus is not on the end of the interaction, but rather on the process of communication within a transitional space. Berne's (1961) transactional process emphasises the content of interactions between the individual and their objects of attachment. In terms of PS, this means the emotionally attuned communication between two antithetical poles: receiver (the attached individual) and sender (objects of attachment) of information (Counted & Zock, 2019). The focus here is on the *social intercourse* between the receiver and sender of information within the circular pattern of movement to and fro between the objects of attachment, since the PS-related actions and behaviour are based upon the nature of such interaction. Hence, while transitional PS is based on the end goal of the attachment relationship (e.g. comfort, security, protection, etc.), the transactional PS phenomenon focuses on the imagined communication between the subject and objects. These interactions trigger religious behaviour, motivational drives, and the representation of a particular object of attachment (Counted, 2018), thus uniting the two-way, reciprocal interaction into an experience of PS. More can be done to understand the transactional and transitional phenomena of PS; this is definitely an area that would benefit from further studies.

Concluding remarks and further studies

Although empirical research on PS is still limited, the commentaries encourage us to believe that our conjectures are more than leaps in the dark. We also believe that comprehending the nature of the relationship between place attachment and religious attachment can provide fruitful insights into other important issues such as attachment-related terrorism (Counted, 2017), attachment disruptions and psychopathology (Kobak, Zajac, & Madsen, 2016), and coping mechanisms in PS (Davis et al., 2018a, 2018b). For example, what happens when the attachment to place, or to God, is disrupted? Will the attached individual be predisposed to John Bowlby's attachment reparative processes (*protest*, *despair*, and *detachment*, PDD) in order to secure their sense of attachment? If they are predisposed to the effects of separation from an object of attachment through PDD, what will this look like in a real-life situation? These are important questions that require further studies, and are central to the PS framework. The PS model is not limited to being unable to illuminate something beyond itself. However, while we are open to integrating further complementary frameworks such as *emergentism* into the PS model, this should be done with caution in order not to go beyond the boundaries that PS can effectively help us to understand.

Acknowledgements

We thank the journal editors, especially Dr Ladd, for initiating and coordinating the series on *Place Spirituality*, and to the contributors for participating in this scholarly exchange.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Victor Counted  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0944-3775>

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