

Chapter 16

Healing Systems of Well-Being and People-Place Interactions: Complexity, Context, and Connections



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Abstract In Chap. 1, we briefly discussed place as a central ingredient to psycho-social-spiritual resources that form part of the healing systems people rely on to support their well-being. Drawing on the multidisciplinary contributions presented in this volume, we elaborate on this idea by situating place as the cornerstone of healing systems, well-being, and the intersection between them. After providing a description of healing systems, we explore possible approaches to classifying heal-

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ing systems and highlight the importance of place to healing systems and well-being more broadly. We conclude by discussing some potential ways in which this novel approach could open up new opportunities for research and practice dedicated to the promotion of human flourishing.

Keywords Place · Healing systems · Health · Well-being · Human flourishing

In recent years, the concept of well-being has increasingly been viewed as a key part of what makes people and societies flourish (VanderWeele et al., 2022). This shift to extend the traditional emphasis on ‘health’ to a more comprehensive understanding of what is constituted by ‘doing or being well,’ which is sometimes referred to as *complete well-being* (Lee et al., 2022), has brought into sharper focus the role that people’s daily interactions with their environments—including their places of work, worship, pilgrimage, and leisure—play in shaping well-being (Counted et al., 2021). As part of the broader movement to understand and promote global health, the subfield of place-based health promotion has also become more prominent over the years (Dankwa-Mullan & Pérez-Stable, 2016; Khullar & Chokshi, 2020). Within this growing subfield, a variety of definitions have been proposed to capture the concept of place as it relates to well-being. A common perspective is that ‘place’ refers to a spatial setting (e.g., home, school, office, park, café) that a person interacts with on a regular basis (Seamon, 2018). It has also been suggested that a place can have multiple layers to it, such as the physical elements of a place, the character of a place, the activities that occur in a place, and the experiences that people have in a place (Counted, Neff, et al., 2020a). Many scholars also acknowledge that a person’s connection with a place can affect how they view themselves in the world (Counted et al., 2021; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Proshansky, 1978). However, relatively little is known about how psycho-social-spiritual resources tied to place, such as those within the domain of religion/spirituality, affect a person’s well-being (Counted et al., 2020b; Counted, 2019; Counted & Zock, 2019). As part of emerging efforts to address this gap in the literature, this volume brought together an international group of scholars representing many disciplines to explore some of the place-related psycho-social-spiritual factors that may shape an individual’s well-being.

A common thread that can be extracted from the chapters in this volume is that many cultural groups rely on healing systems that contain prescriptive knowledge and practices about how to sustain and promote well-being. In Chap. 1, we introduced the idea that healing systems are set against the backdrop of place, with place serving as the bedrock of several resources that people across cultures draw on to adaptively manage stressful events, cope with existential issues, and develop to their full potential (Counted et al., 2021; Kirmayer, 2004; MacLennan et al., 1996). Building on this idea, this chapter explores the concept of place as the central node that intersects many different psycho-social-spiritual resources which are integral to the healing systems that support the well-being of people from various cultures. As the world shifts its focus toward what life might look like after the coronavirus

disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (De Kock et al., 2022), there is a moral, political, and economic imperative to understand the impacts of place-based stressful life events on people and identify opportunities to promote recovery and resilience. It is upon this premise that we wish to briefly reflect on the centrality of place as a foundational part of the resources that are embedded in healing systems, and highlight the potential for ‘place’ to be harnessed as a means of providing individuals with opportunities to pursue, sustain, and enhance their well-being.

What Are Healing Systems?

Systems thinking in the social and behavioral sciences is an approach to understanding social phenomena by viewing them as complex, dynamic, and interactive networks of individuals, institutions, and societal structures (Hammond, 2019; Höltge et al., 2023). A system is characterized by a set of interrelated elements that work together to accomplish a goal (Blanchard & Heeren, 2020), including people, organizations, policies, and other social elements that are connected by shared goals, roles, rules, feedback mechanisms, and communication channels (Hammond, 2019). In defining healing systems, we emphasize that ‘healing’ is a complex process involving a constellation of different resources. These resources can include religious and social traditions, rituals, spiritual practices, community support networks, and institutional care (Cowden et al., 2022a; Koenig, 2015). Therefore, it is important to view healing systems as encompassing a range of interconnected constituents that can influence well-being across the lifespan.

Healing systems have evolved throughout history and vary across cultures, but they share some common features as well. For instance, most healing systems contain a strong religious/spiritual component that can be categorized along certain dimensions, including rituals, beliefs, practices, and identities (Quah, 2003). Moreover, healing systems often incorporate some combination of folk medicine, counseling services, support groups, and related resources that promote and sustain well-being (Barsh, 1997; Hufford, 1997). When compared with Western medicine, many healing systems around the world take a holistic approach to well-being by incorporating practices that help individuals maintain a balance between physical, mental, social, and religious/spiritual aspects of life (Hufford, 1997; Quah, 2003).

Although the term ‘healing’ has a positive connotation, healing systems include numerous psycho-social-spiritual resources that have the potential to either promote or degrade well-being. For example, religion/spirituality is a key part of many healing systems, but it is a double-edged sword in that it may be a source of support or strain for people (Cowden, Nakamura, et al., 2022a; Jung et al., 2022). A person’s relationship with God may provide a sense of comfort during times of crisis, or perceived abandonment by God in the midst of a stressful situation might lead a person to experience tension or conflict in their relationship with God (Counted et al., 2022; Cowden et al., 2022b; Voytenko et al., 2023). In the same way, collective rituals can promote community cohesion and enhance feelings of belonging and safety among

community members (Singh et al., 2020; Xygalatas et al., 2013), but some aspects of group rituals can be destructive and cause harm to members of the community (Griffith, 2010). For example, rites of passage in some cultures (e.g., traditional male circumcision practices that are common in some indigenous African cultures) can be dangerous for those initiated, but such rituals are also known to foster a sense of communal belonging and personal renewal among those initiated because the occasion is thought to mark the beginning of a new phase in their lives (Abbey et al., 2021). Thus, it is important to consider the diverse—both positive and negative—impacts that resources embedded within healing systems may have on well-being.

Categorizing Healing Systems

Although we use the term ‘healing systems’ to broadly capture a vast network of interconnected resources that shape well-being, this broad framing does not preclude a more granular delineation of specific healing systems that might be emphasized when approaching the concept of a healing system from a particular angle. For example, consider the specific healing systems of (1) religion/spirituality, (2) community, and (3) healthcare, each of which is independently composed of various interrelated psycho-social-spiritual resources while also sharing many points of connection with one another. All three of these healing systems can play an important role in the healing process, often through their influences on each other. To illustrate briefly, religion/spirituality is an important part of many cultures around the world (Cowden et al., 2023). Individuals who have religious beliefs tend to have stronger social relationships with other people in their communities and participate in more social activities compared to those who do not (Singh et al., 2020; Xygalatas et al., 2013). This social connectivity is important because people who are socially connected tend to be healthier than those who are isolated or lack close social relationships with others (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Garrido et al., 2022; Matos et al., 2021). In addition, people who belong to religious organizations tend to have higher literacy rates in their communities and are better educated about their health conditions and prevention strategies compared to those who are not religious (see Christy et al., 2017; Kelvie, 2018). Healthcare is a healing system that is facilitated by designated individuals (e.g., medical doctors, traditional healers, religious leaders), and it can include both conventional and non-conventional procedures to treat illness and injury. People who receive formal healthcare for illnesses are less likely to experience complications related to their treatment than those who do not receive such care (Bakker et al., 2013).

The above mentioned examples highlight some of the distinct potential contributions of specific healing systems to individual well-being. Although each healing system provides its own unique set of experiences and benefits, they all unfold within the milieu of place. These healing systems are reciprocally connected to features of the place in which they are practiced, signaling the importance of understanding how the physical environment both shapes and is shaped by people as they seek and pursue well-being in the places where they live, work, and play.

Markers of Healing Systems: Complexity, Context, and Connections

Healing systems form a rich tapestry of interrelated elements that coalesce to promote well-being across cultures. At their core, these systems are complex and dynamic, functioning as a network of individuals, institutions, and societal structures that work together to enhance wellness. Such intricate networks are typified by a range of factors, such as religious/spiritual and social traditions, rituals, cultural practices, community support networks, and institutional care. Understanding the interconnectivity of these components is vital in appreciating the inherent complexity, context, and connections of healing systems. Complexity underpins the core understanding of healing systems. They are not singular, uniform entities; rather, they are intricate networks that include multiple interrelated elements. Healing systems are characterized by diverse resources. Each component contributes distinctively to the promotion of well-being. For instance, religion/spirituality often provides moral guidance, social support, and a framework to understand and manage adversity (see Chap. 2). On the other hand, community networks offer social support, a sense of belonging, and collective identity. This complexity demands an approach that appreciates the multiplicity of factors and their interrelations in shaping the outcomes of these systems (Cowden et al., 2022a; Koenig, 2015).

Context affects the structure, function, and outcomes of a healing system. Whether it is personal, social, or cultural factors, each plays a crucial role in molding healing systems. The context may vary from the intimate spaces of worship that individuals connect with for spiritual growth (Chap. 2), to community-wide responses to crises, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chaps. 8 and 9), and even to places imbued with cultural or spiritual significance such as religious tourism sites (Chap. 15). By exploring these diverse contexts, we can uncover the nuanced ways in which healing systems function and can influence well-being. In this volume, we dissected these healing systems into three spheres—personal, social, and cultural—that each contribute uniquely to our understanding of healing systems.

As an experiential context, the personal sphere lies at the intersection of the individual and the healing system, being an essential catalyst in the journey toward well-being. It encapsulates individual interactions with their healing systems, informed by their sociocultural and religious/spiritual backgrounds. Drawing insights from Meagher's (Chap. 2) exploration of worship space attachment, we observe that the deep personal ties people have with spiritual places can contribute to spiritual growth. The relationship between a person and their place of worship underscores the role of the individual in the healing process. This bond creates a space that nourishes their spirituality and, subsequently, their well-being. Moreover, personal engagement with healing systems is shaped not only by Western perspectives but also by non-Western worldviews. As Basu (Chap. 3) illustrates in her exploration of Gyanganj, Eastern approaches to healing systems encompass a rich interplay of place, spirituality, and wellness. This exploration reinforces the idea

that an individual's cultural context informs their engagement with healing systems, thereby influencing their overall well-being.

Although healing is often perceived as an individual journey, healing systems unravel within a broader social context. In times of adversity, healing systems can play an important role in fostering social resilience. Here, the collective nature of healing comes to the fore, allowing communities to respond to, recover from, and adapt to stressful situations. Captari's work (Chap. 8) provides valuable insight into this domain by exploring the influence of embodied spirituality on health amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Her work demonstrates how the community's shared spiritual practices can contribute to resilience during times of crisis (also see Chap. 12).

In addition, the experience of healing systems is deeply interwoven with the cultural threads of a society. Cultural connections inform our understanding of healing, providing a contextual framework within which individuals and communities navigate their healing journeys. Cultural connections offer another essential lens through which to examine healing systems. These connections manifest in shared beliefs, practices, and rituals associated with spaces of cultural or spiritual significance. Shereni et al.'s research (Chap. 15) on religious tourism in Zimbabwe underscores the ties between religion/spirituality, place attachment, and well-being. They highlight how religious sites, steeped in cultural significance, can foster a sense of spiritual connectedness and enhance overall well-being. Understanding people-place relationships is crucial to examining healing systems, shedding light on the critical role that culturally significant spaces play in facilitating healing.

Lastly, cultural connections form the lifeblood of healing systems. These networks are bound by numerous connections between individuals, communities, resources, and places. The connection between an individual's religious beliefs and their social relationships demonstrates the interplay between personal engagement and community within a healing system (e.g., costly display of religious commitment and cues increase prosociality and cooperation; see Xygalatas et al., 2013). Similarly, the relationship between people and their culturally significant spaces illuminates the bond between individuals, their culture, and their healing system (Cowden et al., 2023). These connections, both visible and invisible, influence the flow of resources within the healing system, shaping its overall impact on well-being. The defining characteristic of a healing system lies in its unique ability to marshal a myriad of resources towards the common goal of well-being. Often, these systems have an ingrained religious/spiritual element, with rituals, beliefs, practices, and identities contributing to their overall structure. Additionally, they can feature a combination of traditional practices, counseling services, support groups, and related resources that work towards promoting and sustaining wellness. These components, both in isolation and interplay, ultimately contribute to the healing process. Comparing healing systems across different cultures, we often see a holistic approach to wellness, incorporating practices that help individuals maintain a balance between physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects of life.

The interplay between healing systems and place is a fascinating component that provides a plethora of insights into how wellness is pursued and experienced. Healing systems, characterized by complexity, context, and connections,

encompass a multifaceted network of interrelated elements that work together to promote well-being. These systems integrate diverse resources, including religious/spiritual traditions, community support, and institutional care. The structure, function, and outcomes of these systems are greatly influenced by various personal, social, and cultural contexts. These may range from personal worship spaces to community responses during crises and culturally significant places. Furthermore, the healing systems thrive on connections between individuals, communities, resources, and places, all of which can shape the flow of resources within the system. Understanding the individual's personal engagement, the community's social resilience, and the cultural connections inherent to healing spaces is essential to appreciating the complexity and diversity of healing systems. By viewing healing systems through the lenses of personal, social, and cultural, we can better appreciate their multidimensional nature and the interconnectivity of the components within them.

The Importance of Place to Healing Systems and Human Flourishing

Regardless of the approach that is used to classify healing systems, what is common across all healing systems is that they have roots in place (see Fig. 16.1). In addition, the psycho-social-spiritual resources within each healing system intersect with and are molded by the personal, social, or cultural features of the places to which they are connected. This process can be considered a form of 'co-evolution' (Jablonka et al., 2012), such that people-place interactions co-evolve with the social, personal, and cultural changes that occur in a particular place. In this sense, the sociocultural environment has the potential to shape the development of healing systems over time.

Place can be considered the foundation on which the resources that people draw on to engage with the physical, metaphysical, and social aspects of life are built. From this perspective, place serves as a platform for cultivating and engaging psycho-social-spiritual resources that may enhance the well-being of people who use them. For example, place provides a setting that can facilitate connections between people (Carolan et al., 2011; Robins et al., 1991). In addition, place may instill a sense of comfort and security among people who are navigating periods of distress or illness (Billig, 2006; Counted et al., 2020a). Place can also create opportunities for people to stay connected to their heritage and traditions, which may help enrich their lives by strengthening their sense of meaning and connection to the world around them (Basham, 2008; Hoang et al., 2020). These examples point to place as the building block for psycho-social-spiritual resources to emerge and form part of healing systems. While recognizing that certain features of place also have the potential to disrupt the capacity of healing systems to support well-being (Counted et al., 2021), situating different healing systems within an overarching framework that is centered on place could contribute to improving our

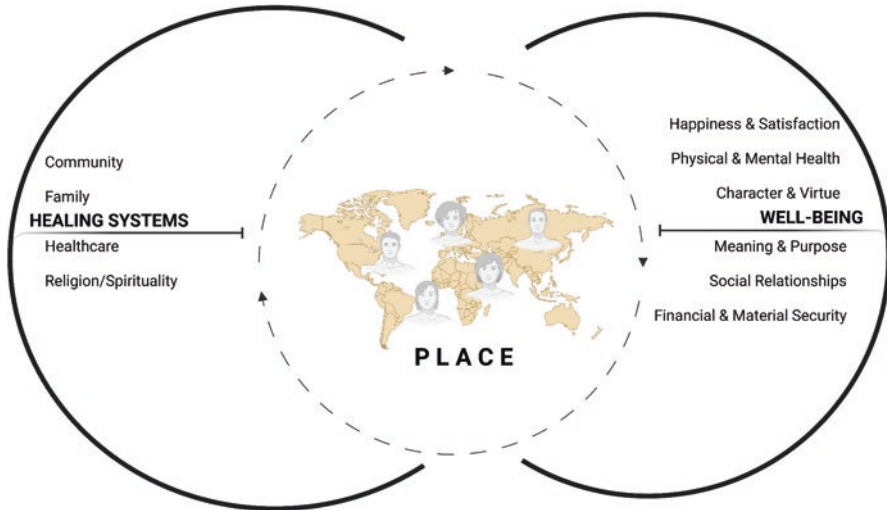


Fig. 16.1 The centrality of place to intersections between healing systems and well-being

understanding of the healing systems that are salient both within and across cultures. This conceptual approach also offers a useful starting point for designing more holistic and integrative approaches to promote the well-being of different populations.

Place provides the context for the development and maintenance of healing systems, but the centrality of place to human life can also be extended to the notion of flourishing more broadly (Counted et al., 2021). One of the primary ways in which a place supports human well-being is through the social interactions and connections that occur in the process of people-place interactions. Many empirical studies have shown that social relationships are formed, maintained, and strengthened through the interactions that people have in a place (Seamon, 2018). For example, the studies on religious tourism in Chaps. 13, 14, and 15 show that a place often provides people with a sense of identity and belonging that enables them to connect meaningfully with the people around them. Similarly, the character or spirit of a place (e.g., physical features) is also an important element of people-place interactions that can contribute to well-being (Counted et al., 2021). People who explore the religious sites of a particular city often experience a sense of inner peace, wonder, and inspiration as they encounter the ancient architecture of these sacred places (see Chaps. 13, 14, and 15). Similarly, spending time in a religious environment can provide people with a feeling of peace and tranquility that can inspire creativity and help them improve their overall well-being (see Chap. 2). These brief illustrative examples suggest that the interactions between people and places that are significant to them can have important implications for their well-being, and further consideration of the potential benefits of people-place interactions for human flourishing could help to inform the way that scholars and practitioners work toward the promotion of well-being in diverse communities.

Future Directions

To further unravel the complexity and diversity of healing systems, below are potential future directions for research that delve into the domains of complexity, context, and connections, with a particular emphasis on the role of place in healing systems.

Understanding Complexity in Healing Systems

The study of healing systems reveals a landscape of complexity and diversity. Exploring this terrain requires a deep understanding of the multifaceted aspects that interplay within these systems. The intricacies within these systems, marked by the interplay of diverse, interrelated elements, deserve further investigation. Future research could illuminate our understanding of the inner workings of these systems by focusing on a few specific areas.

Exploring Multiplicity The first facet of understanding complexity in healing systems can be achieved by exploring the multitude of resources they encompass. Healing systems are rich tapestries woven from different cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions. Each of these traditions has unique mechanisms and resources that contribute to well-being, and understanding these individual components can help us gain a more holistic view of health and well-being across cultures. Research could involve comparative studies across different healing traditions. Such comparisons could delve into the specific practices, rituals, beliefs, and resources that each tradition offers. This exploration can enhance our understanding of how diverse resources within healing systems contribute to well-being. Moreover, it can shed light on how these traditions adapt to local contexts and respond to specific health and wellness needs.

Appreciating Interrelations Another aspect of understanding the complexity within healing systems is appreciating the interrelations between various factors. These systems are not a mere collection of isolated components but function as interconnected networks where different elements influence one another. Understanding these interrelations can provide insights into how the overall system operates and how it impacts well-being. For instance, exploring how religious/spiritual practices interplay with community support and institutional care can shed light on the dynamics of these systems. How does community support amplify the effect of religious practices on well-being? What is the role of institutional care in enhancing the efficacy of spiritual rituals? How do these elements coalesce to shape the outcomes of healing systems? By appreciating these interrelations, we can better understand the complex machinery of healing systems.

Diving Deeper into Contexts of Healing Systems

The role of personal, social, and cultural spheres in shaping healing systems deserves further exploration. Contextual nuances can influence the workings of healing systems. The personal, social, and cultural spheres support the development, organization, and refinement of healing systems. A richer understanding of these elements can offer a more comprehensive view of healing systems, thereby opening up new avenues for research.

Examining Personal Engagement Personal engagement with healing systems is a multifaceted interplay between individual beliefs, sociocultural backgrounds, and religious/spiritual inclinations. Exploration of this engagement can be enhanced by considering the role of geographic location or place in fostering a deeper connection with these systems. An individual's interactions within healing systems can be influenced by their cultural and religious/spiritual backgrounds. For instance, specific religious beliefs may shape how individuals perceive and engage with healing practices. Similarly, personal attachment to specific healing systems can be tied to their geographical origin or the place they associate with a sense of spirituality and well-being.

Unraveling Social Resilience Healing systems are more than individual entities; they exist within, and contribute to, the broader societal structure. These systems can play a critical role in fostering community resilience, particularly during times of crisis. Shared spiritual practices and religious rituals can serve as anchors, offering psychological stability and promoting communal harmony. Investigating the role of healing systems in times of crisis can offer insights into how these systems contribute to societal resilience. Examining the role of religious rituals and shared spiritual practices can strengthen our understanding of their influence on psychological health after the acute phase of crises has waned.

Understanding Cultural Connections Culture has an important influence on healing systems, shaping their form and function. Cultural connections within these systems can be manifested in various ways, from the significance of cultural spaces in the healing process to the influence of shared beliefs, practices, and rituals on the healing journey. Further research into these cultural connections can reveal how culturally significant spaces contribute to the healing process. This exploration could involve investigating the role of shared beliefs and practices in promoting healing and well-being. Understanding the cultural connections within healing systems can shed light on their significance and value within specific cultural landscapes.

Connections within Healing Systems

As healing systems are interconnected networks, understanding these connections is paramount. The interconnectedness within healing systems is a fundamental feature that needs closer examination. Future research on healing systems should focus

on dissecting the many connections that shape them. This line of investigation could shed light on how individual and community engagements, along with culturally significant spaces, shape the healing process.

Deciphering the Personal-Community Interface One promising future research direction lies in studying the interplay between personal and community engagement within healing systems. This can involve an in-depth exploration of how religious beliefs and social relationships affect healing systems. Individuals are not isolated entities but social beings whose personal choices and attitudes are often affected by their communal associations. This social interplay could have profound effects on how people perceive and engage with healing systems. For example, the degree of faith in a healing system could be shaped by the communal validation it receives. Similarly, social relationships might influence access to and uptake of certain healing practices.

Unpacking People-Place Relationships The relationship between people and their culturally significant spaces within the context of healing systems is another potential area of future exploration. These spaces are not merely physical locations but repositories of shared beliefs, traditions, and histories that form a part of the community's identity. Understanding how the bond with these spaces influences the healing process could be particularly generative. For example, does a healing process become more effective when performed in a culturally significant place, and how do these places facilitate the healing process? Moreover, places can also offer a sense of comfort and security that influences their healing process. Research along these lines could reveal the myriad ways in which culturally significant places support healing. Through these future directions, we can delve deeper into the intricate connections within healing systems, thus enabling us to better understand their role and efficacy in promoting individual and community well-being. By looking beyond isolated components and focusing on the connections that weave different facets of healing systems together, we can foster a more holistic understanding of healing systems.

Conclusion

Healing systems, entrenched within the tapestry of human history, have persistently been the fulcrum to address health challenges and have formed a pivotal part of personal and cultural development. These culturally embedded healing systems hold an enduring promise for individual and community well-being, ushering a compelling imperative to enrich our understanding of different healing systems, their contributions to well-being, and their possible integration into healthcare practices for fostering human flourishing. Building on the multidisciplinary insights presented in this volume, we proposed a conceptual framework placing 'place' as the cornerstone of healing systems, which underpins well-being across diverse cultures. As the foundation of numerous psycho-social-spiritual resources that are integral to

the healing systems people make use of, further consideration of place as a central ingredient of the resources that people value could open new possibilities for research and healthcare practices oriented toward supporting human flourishing in a variety of settings around the world.

Therefore, our approach towards future research on healing systems ought to be multifold, including an exploration of the multiplicity within healing systems and an appreciation of their intricate interrelations. Applying a multidimensional and multilayered lens to healing systems will not only enhance our understanding of the complexity of healing systems but also unlock the potential to harness such systems more effectively. By aligning our future research directions with these considerations, we will be better equipped to leverage the potential of healing systems for global human flourishing.

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