20. Sensing the Sacred in Place: Embodied Mechanisms of Spiritual Ties to Place.

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Abstract: The concept of Spiritual Ties to Place (STP) captures the psychological connections individuals form with the sacred in specific, meaningful locations. STP emphasizes how places are tethered to one's spiritual connection by evoking a sense of the sacred. The connections to 'religious/spiritual' places is a multidimensional psychological phenomenon often experienced at three main domains: personal, social, and cultural. It is proposed that STP is developed through emotional experiences, often triggered by the natural beauty or aesthetic and physical features of a place. Cognitive processes also play an important role, binding individuals to the cultural and spiritual significance of a place, such as a secular Jew's experience of Jerusalem or a Muslim to Mecca. Behavioral and social interactions within these spaces—such as participating in communal spiritual practices—further reinforce the ties to place. Drawing on senses of place theory, it is argued that these ties represent a form of embodied mechanism represented as the process of sensing the sacred in various place domains. Each of these place domains of spiritual connection offers unique opportunities for engagement, reflection, and connection with the sacred.

Keywords: spiritual ties to place; sense of place; place attachment; embodied cognition; well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual ties to place (STP) represent a profound form of attachment where individuals experience a deep connection to the sacredness of specific places (Counted et al., 2024). These places, whether natural landscapes like mountains and rivers or constructed environments such as places of worship (e.g., churches, synagogues, shrines, mosques), are imbued with religious, cultural, or personal significance (Meagher et al., in press).. They serve as focal points where emotional, cognitive, and social experiences converge, shaping how individuals engage with their spirituality. Importantly, STP go beyond physical proximity; they reflect an ongoing relationship between the individual and the sacred qualities of a place (Counted et al., 2023).

Religion and spirituality are often seen as pathways for individuals to connect with something beyond the material world, such as a deity, higher power, or cosmic force (Watts, 2017). However, spiritual practices are inevitably rooted in the physical world, and transcendent experiences frequently occur in particular places (Meagher, 2022). Across different faith traditions, sacred places serve as sites for spiritual encounters, whether it be the Promised Land in Jewish tradition (Counted & Watts, 2017) or an Islamic religious site (Latifa et al., 2019), collective places of worship (Meagher, 2018), private shrines within homes (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004), burial sites (Frohne, 2015), or natural settings like forests and rivers (Shiota et al., 2014). These places are often experienced as sacred spaces capable of eliciting powerful transcendent emotions, such as awe and reverence (Counted et al., 2024; Counted & Watts, 2019a, 2019b; Counted, 2018).

This chapter positions STP as the connection and senses of the sacred in particular places. This refined definition draws insights from the attitudinal perspective of senses of place theory (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), showing how STP is more than just an attachment to the sacred in place, but includes the sensing of the sacred in significant places. These sacred

qualities may arise from religious significance, cultural traditions, or deeply personal experiences, profoundly shaping a person's spirituality, sense of place, and overall well-being (Counted et al., 2023; Meagher, 2023). These connections are driven by emotional responses (e.g., awe, peace, or reverence), and cognitive processes (e.g., contemplation, meaning-making), making them deeply personal and spiritually enriching (Counted et al., 2024)

To frame this, the concept of place attachment is key: it refers to the emotional bond one forms with a place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). However, STP, as distinct from place attachment, emphasises the connection to the sacred within a place (Counted et al., 2024). The chapter builds on this distinction, proposing that STP offers a unique sacred-spatial bond that influences not only personal identity but also embodied social and cultural connections. Drawing also on the theory of senses of place, this chapter will further conceptualize how these spiritual connections are forged through sensory inputs and emotional reactions within a place. This conceptualization extends the definition of STP as the senses of the sacred in place; thus the sight of a towering cathedral or the quiet solitude of a natural grove can evoke a sense of awe or introspection, connecting the individual to the sacred or sacred qualities of the environment (Meagher, 2018, 2023; Lewicka, 2011). These sensory and emotional experiences contribute to the development of STP by enabling individuals to encounter the sacred through their perceptions, beliefs, and memories. Moreover, sacred places are interpreted not only through individual experiences but also through cultural narratives. For example, Mecca is not merely a physical location; it represents a convergence of personal devotion, communal worship, and cultural heritage (Counted & Watts, 2019; Latifa et al., 2019). Similarly, a mountain range or river may hold sacred significance in particular religious or cultural traditions, shaping how the sacredness of the place is experienced. Thus, STP are formed through a combination of sensory, emotional, and cultural lenses, creating meaningful connections that anchor individuals to their spiritual identities via the process of place attachment and senses of place. Taken together, this chapter explores the ways the psychological processes of STP manifest across personal, social, and cultural domains. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it examines the mechanisms behind these ties and their implications for human flourishing.

ATTACHMENT TO THE SACRED

Defining the sacred can be a complex task because it involves various interpretations across religious and spiritual traditions. At its core, however, the sacred refers to anything regarded as divine, transcendent, or representative of Ultimate Reality or Truth, as understood by an individual or group (Hill et al., 2000). This might include a divine being, such as God or Allah, or spiritual entities like ancestors, bodhisattvas, or deities in polytheistic traditions. The sacred can also be found in objects, rituals, or places imbued with spiritual significance (Counted et al., 2024).

Individuals can form a connection to the sacred. This phenomenon, also known as religious/spiritual (R/S) attachment, has been extensively studied for over three decades in the psychology of religion literature (Granqvist, 2020). R/S attachment refers to the emotional bond individuals create with a divine figure or higher power. This attachment is rooted in the human need for security and protection, much like the bond between a child and a caregiver (Bowlby, 1969/73). Across different traditions, people seek comfort and guidance from sacred figures. For example, Christians may turn to God as a source of refuge in difficult times, much like a child would seek safety in a parent (Counted, 2016a; Granqvist, 2020). In Islam, Allah is often seen as a protector who is close to believers, especially during hardship (Sim & Loh, 2003). Similarly, in Hinduism, devotees form emotional bonds with

deities like Krishna or Shiva, finding comfort and guidance through their devotion (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). Even in Buddhism, followers often turn to the Buddha or bodhisattvas for compassion and relief from suffering, akin to the caregiving relationship (Granqvist, 2020). These bonds with divine figures highlight the personal nature of spiritual attachment. People turn to their spiritual "caregivers" not only for guidance but also for emotional support, trust, and love (Counted, 2025). This attachment creates a sense of proximity to the sacred, offering comfort and security in times of distress. The bonding experience with the sacred is not confined to specific religions but is seen across various traditions, including indigenous practices where individuals may feel connected to ancestral spirits, the natural environment, or sacred objects for emotional support and guidance (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Counted, 2016a; Granqvist, 2020).

These attachments to the sacred can be one way to conceptualize spiritual ties to place, but this perspective has its limits. Focusing solely on R/S attachment does not fully capture the complexity of STP, especially given that any R/S experience unfolds within the milieu of place. The sacredness of a place involves more than emotional bonds; it also taps into how people sense and experience the sacred within a place. This invites the need to explore sensing the sacred in place as an aspect of STP, which considers how sensory and cognitive engagement with a place shapes attitudinal responses to the sacred. The sacred is not just something to which people attach; it is something they perceive, feel, and respond to in different ways. Sacred places evoke responses that go beyond attachment, engaging individuals in a broader relationship with their surroundings. This approach allows for a richer understanding of how the sacred is experienced in places, focusing on the sensory and attitudinal responses that connect people to the sacred qualities of the environment.

In other words, while R/S attachment is one way of understanding the experiential dimension of religion, it is limiting in that it overlooks the broader sensory and attitudinal dimensions of how the sacred is experienced. To fully understand STP, this chapter explores how individuals perceive and respond to the sacred in a place through the senses.

SENSING THE SACRED IN PLACE

Sensing the sacred involves perceiving and experiencing something that transcends the ordinary, often regarded as divine or connected to Ultimate Reality. The sacred holds profound spiritual meaning for the individual (Hill et al., 2000). This interaction with the sacred is not merely conceptual; it often unfolds through emotions, thoughts, and sensory perceptions that draw people into a deeper connection with the divine. The sacred manifests not only in abstract beliefs but also through engagement with physical places that evoke a sense of awe, reverence, or peace.

Sensing the sacred in place involves how certain significant places become integral to this perception of the sacred (Counted & Watts, 2017). These places could range from natural settings like mountains and rivers to constructed spaces such as temples, churches, or homes (Meagher, 2023; Tuan, 1977; Seamon, 2018). These spaces are more than mere physical locations; they are imbued with spiritual meaning, providing individuals with an opportunity to engage with the sacred through their senses. The sight of a cathedral, the sound of a river, or the feel of a place steeped in history can evoke feelings of connection with the divine, transforming a place from ordinary to sacred.

The theory of sense of place offers insight into how this connection develops. Sense of place refers to the attitudinal responses (e.g., emotional, conactive, cognitive) individuals have toward specific locations (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). This connection is also influenced by the physical environment and the spiritual or cultural

narratives associated with the place. For instance, the Ganges River is not simply a body of water for many Hindus but a manifestation of divine purity, linked to centuries of spiritual and cultural practices (Basu, 2019; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Sheldrake (2019) made a similar argument about places of pilgrimage, which inherit memories that are transmitted culturally through what he terms ‘morphic resonance’. Similarly, Tuan (1977) describes how natural landscapes can evoke deep emotional responses, creating spiritual experiences that are inseparable from the place itself. These experiences shape how people perceive the sacredness of a place and foster strong spiritual ties.

Sensing the sacred goes beyond simple attachment. It involves active interaction with the environment, where people participate in rituals, reflect on the spiritual meaning of the place, and engage their senses in the experience of the sacred. As Eliade (1987) suggests, sacred places are those where the divine is believed to manifest, offering opportunities for individuals to experience the divine through sensory and emotional engagement. For example, the sense of awe one feels when standing in a quiet forest or before a towering mountain can elicit a spiritual response that is not about emotional attachment alone but about the place's ability to evoke the sacred (Joye & Dewitte, 2016). This interaction between the physical characteristics of a place and an individual’s spiritual perceptions is central to understanding how STP develops. Rituals, symbols, and cultural traditions are essential in fostering these ties. They provide the framework through which individuals can experience the sacred in a place, linking personal sensory experiences with collective spiritual practices (Tuan, 1977; Casey, 2013). For instance, pilgrimage sites like Mecca or Jerusalem are not only significant because of their history or physical features; they are made sacred through centuries of ritual and communal worship (Counted & Watts, 2017; Counted & Watts, 2019). These rituals heighten sensory awareness and deepen the psychological experience of the place, making the connection to the sacred more tangible (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). The spiritual emotions evoked in these settings—whether awe, reverence, or peace—are tied to the sensory and cultural context of the location (Joye & Dewitte, 2016).

Therefore, sensing the sacred in a place involves an interaction between a place’s physical features and the individual’s personal values or cultural beliefs. For example, a person who believes in experiencing God through nature may find a deep spiritual connection to a mountain or forest, while another person may sense the sacred in the structured environment of a church or temple. The sensory experience of a place—the sound of wind through trees or the beauty of religious architecture—interacts with an individual’s spiritual expectations, making the place a focal point for their connection to the divine (Smaldone et al., 2005; Seamon, 2018). Sensing the sacred in place is, therefore, a natural extension of understanding STP. It is not just about emotional bonds to a location but about how places evoke the sacred through sensory experiences, rituals, and cultural meanings. This range of interactions allow individuals to perceive and engage with the divine in their surroundings, fostering a deep spiritual connection that goes beyond simple attachment.

SENSING THE SACRED IN MULTIPLE PLACE DOMAINS

The experience of STP is rarely confined to a single domain. Instead, it is a multidimensional process that involves several aspects of an individual's life. This section explores how STP emerges and is experienced through the sacred in multiple place domains: personal, social, and cultural. These spiritual connections manifest in personal places, such as homes or sacred spaces of solitude, in social settings like community spaces where shared rituals occur, and within cultural domains where collective identities are forged through sacred traditions. Each domain offers unique insights into how the sacred is perceived and internalized in significant

places. However, these domains often overlap and interact, creating a holistic experience of STP. Rather than existing in isolation, the personal, social, and cultural domains of place converge and reinforce each other, creating a unified experience of sensing the sacred in significant places. This convergence suggests an alternative definition of STP as *the senses of the sacred in a significant place*, where the sacred is felt, shared, and understood through personal experiences, social relationships, and cultural meanings.

Personal Domain

In the personal domain, STP is often initiated through emotional and cognitive experiences that connect individuals to sacred locations. These ties emerge when a person encounters spaces that evoke profound emotions such as awe, comfort, or security, leading them to form a strong attachment to the place. The emotional connection is often triggered by sensory stimuli in the environment, such as the visual grandeur of a mountain range, the calming sound of waves crashing on a beach, or the tactile experience of touching the stone walls of an ancient temple (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). These sensory experiences anchor the individual's perception of the sacred in that specific place, making the experience tangible and deeply personal. Yet, these personal experiences are rarely limited to the individual; they often open the door to social engagement (at the social domain), as the place becomes a shared space for collective worship or communal gatherings. The emotional security derived from these sacred places acts as a core aspect of spiritual ties. These significant places become safe havens where individuals can retreat for reflection, healing, and personal growth. For instance, pilgrims visiting a sacred site like Lourdes often report feeling a deep sense of comfort and protection, finding in the sacredness of the place a source of emotional and spiritual renewal (Klimiuk & Moriarty, 2021). This emotional attachment is not merely a fleeting feeling but often a lasting bond that draws individuals back to these places repeatedly throughout their lives, reinforcing the spiritual significance of the place in their personal journey. Cognitive processes play an equally important role in forming STP. People incorporate these places into their self-concept, making them a central part of their identity and spiritual narrative (Proshansky et al., 1983).

The process of STP is not just emotional but also cognitive, involving both intuitive and rational mechanisms. Intuitive cognition allows individuals to feel an immediate connection to the sacredness of the place, often triggered by sensory and emotional experiences. For example, someone might instinctively feel a sense of peace and belonging when entering a temple or a shrine, without necessarily engaging in deep reflection at that moment. This immediate, intuitive connection to the sacred qualities of a place is a key element of the personal spiritual tie. Rational cognition, on the other hand, involves reflective thinking about the significance of the place within the individual's spiritual framework. This might include contemplating the history of the place, its religious symbolism, or the personal meaning it holds for the individual. For example, someone visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem may reflect on the site's spiritual and historical importance, as well as its role in their own religious practice. This reflective process strengthens the cognitive bond with the place, allowing the individual to integrate it into their understanding of their faith and spiritual journey (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2013).

Taken together, the personal domain of STP is the result of both emotional and cognitive processes. The emotional experience, driven by sensory engagement with the sacred, creates an immediate, profound bond, while cognitive reflection and the formation of memories enriches the connection over time. These personal ties to sacred places become central to an individual's spiritual development, offering a space for continuous reflection, healing, and growth as they move through different stages of life.

Social Domain

The social domain builds on these personal sensory experiences by fostering shared rituals and practices that strengthen the collective connection to the sacred. Sacred places such as churches, mosques, or temples are not only sites of individual contemplation but also communal spaces where people come together to engage in rituals that reinforce their shared spiritual identity (Meagher, 2023). These places act as behavior settings where rituals, worship, and religious gatherings occur, creating a space where individuals come together to express and strengthen their shared spiritual beliefs. The collective nature of religious practices in faith communities can enhance a sense of belonging not only to the place of worship but also to the group of people who worship there (Counted et al., 2023; Meagher, 2022). This shared engagement fosters a communal identity, where individuals feel emotionally secure and spiritually fulfilled as part of a larger group. For example, the experience of being part of a pilgrimage to a sacred site like Mecca or the Ganges River is inherently communal. Pilgrims journey together, perform rituals in unison, and share in the transformative experience of the pilgrimage, creating a powerful bond with both the sacred place and with their fellow pilgrims (Klimiuk & Moriarty, 2021). These communal experiences are not just about individual spirituality; they are embedded in the collective consciousness of the group, where the place becomes a focal point for shared faith and devotion.

The social engagement within sacred places extends beyond participation in formal religious rituals but also includes the broader social interactions that occur in these spaces. Sacred places often serve as centers for social life, where community members gather for celebrations, festivals, and other events that strengthen social bonds. For example, churches often host social events such as weddings, baptisms, or community meals, which further reinforce the connection between the place, the sacred, and the community. In these moments, the sacred place becomes a space where social relationships are intertwined with spiritual meaning, which then enhances the overall sensing of the sacred in such a place.

When people gather in sacred places, they not only connect with the divine but also with one another. This creates a network of support and security, where individuals feel part of something larger than themselves. The emotional security provided by this communal setting is a key factor in the strength of the STP. For example, religious festivals like Christmas or Eid, celebrated within sacred spaces, often evoke a deep sense of belonging to both the religious community and the spiritual traditions tied to the place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

The behavioral dimension of spiritual ties in the ‘social place’ is evident in the repeated practices that individuals and communities engage in within sacred places. These behaviors, whether they involve daily prayers, seasonal rituals, or annual pilgrimages, create a rhythm of life that is anchored in the place. The continuity of these practices over time reinforces the emotional and spiritual connection to the sacred space. The senses of place in the social context involve both the individual’s emotional response and the collective experience of worship, where the sights, sounds, and movements of ritual create a shared sense of sacredness (Counted & Watts, 2019). The personal sense of the sacred is thus amplified by social interaction, creating a powerful communal bond to the place.

In sum, sacred places function as more than physical spaces; they are contexts where social and spiritual lives intersect, where shared practices strengthen connections to the sacred and to one another. These communal experiences, whether through shared rituals, social interactions, or the continuity of religious practices, foster a sense of belonging, well-being, and spiritual depth that make sacred places become powerful anchors of spiritual and social identity.

Cultural Domain

The *cultural domain* provides the broader context within which personal and social experiences of STP are situated. The cultural context in which a sacred place exists plays an important role in shaping the spiritual ties that individuals form with it. This is because sacred places carry cultural significance that is passed down through rituals, symbols, and stories, making them central to a community's spiritual and cultural identity (Counted et al., 2024). For example, the pilgrimage to Mecca, while a religious obligation for Muslims, also represents a significant cultural practice that is central to Islamic identity. The annual gathering of millions of Muslims at the holy city is a profound display of unity, devotion, and cultural heritage. For the pilgrims, journeying to Mecca connects them not only to their faith but also to the historical and cultural significance of the place. The Kaaba, located in Mecca, stands as a physical symbol of the Islamic faith and a cultural beacon that ties together Muslims from diverse backgrounds across the world (Counted & Watts, 2019b). The experience of the pilgrimage, therefore, reinforces both the religious and cultural identity of the individual, illustrating how sacred places act as vessels for cultural transmission.

Cultural narratives surrounding sacred places are also important in facilitating the transmission of spiritual and cultural heritage across generations (Shaldrake, 2019). Sacred places are often associated with stories, myths, and traditions passed down from ancestors, helping individuals to feel connected to their cultural roots. These narratives, whether conveyed through oral traditions, written texts, or communal rituals, embed sacred places within a larger cultural framework that allows individuals to understand and appreciate their significance. For example, the River Ganges in India is not only a sacred site for Hindus but also carries immense cultural importance. The river is part of the religious myths of creation, purification, and salvation in oriental culture, and its significance is taught through rituals, festivals, and storytelling, thus reinforcing its place in both spiritual and cultural identity (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009).

This connection to cultural heritage is reinforced through various practices, including ritual performances, the use of religious objects, and the celebration of festivals in sacred places. These cultural practices allow individuals to participate in and contribute to the continuation of their cultural and religious traditions (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003). In many indigenous cultures, for instance, sacred places such as mountains, rivers, or forests are seen as the dwelling places of spirits or ancestors. Rituals performed at these sites help preserve the cultural and spiritual integrity of the community, ensuring that younger generations inherit and maintain these traditions (Huntsinger & Fernández-Giménez, 2000). For example, Native American sacred sites like Mount Shasta or Black Elk Peak hold deep cultural significance, as they are regarded as spaces where the divine meets the earth and where tribal ceremonies reinforce both cultural continuity and spiritual beliefs. Through their interaction with these sacred places, individuals not only strengthen their spiritual ties but also contribute to the preservation and continuation of their cultural traditions. This interaction is often expressed through the use of religious symbols, such as icons, altars, or statues, that embody the cultural and spiritual values of a community. These symbols act as focal points within sacred places, drawing individuals into a better understanding of their cultural and religious identity. For example, in Catholicism, the veneration of religious icons within churches (e.g., in ethnic Saints of South America) plays a role in shaping the cultural experience of the sacred, such that it allows worshippers to connect with both their faith and their cultural heritage (Graziano, 2006). The presence of these objects or symbolic representation of the icons within sacred places reinforces the cultural narratives tied to the space, strengthening the spiritual and cultural bonds that individuals have with the place.

In the cultural domain, sacred places also serve as spaces where cultural identity is negotiated and expressed. These places allow individuals to engage with their cultural history and participate in the rituals that define their religious community. The Western Wall in Jerusalem is not only a sacred site in Judaism but also a cultural symbol of Jewish resilience and identity. Praying at the Wall connects individuals to the long history of the Jewish people, their struggles, and their spiritual journey, making the Wall a focal point for both religious and cultural expressions of identity (Pullan et al., 2013). The senses of place here are tethered to the historical and cultural narratives that give meaning to the sacred space, which interlink personal and social experiences to a broader cultural heritage (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). The cultural dimension enriches the personal and social senses of the sacred by embedding them within a larger, enduring tradition.

Taken together, the senses of place theory allows us to see how the personal, social, and cultural domains of STP are interconnected. The personal emotional response to a sacred place is often shaped by cultural symbols and rituals, while the social experience of worship is rooted in both individual and cultural senses of the sacred. These interactions create a dynamic and evolving spiritual relationship with places, where personal spirituality, collective worship, and cultural heritage continuously influence and reinforce one another. As an illustration, a pilgrimage to a sacred site may begin as a personal spiritual quest, but the sensory experience of being in the place, combined with the presence of others participating in the same rituals, transforms it into a collective act. The cultural significance of the pilgrimage, passed down through generations, further amplifies the personal and communal experiences, grounding them in a shared spiritual and cultural narrative. In this way, sacred places act as sites where these domains of place converge. This cyclical process fosters a holistic and transformative experience of STP (Counted et al., 2024). Over time, these spiritual ties evolve as individuals grow, social dynamics shift, and cultural contexts change. Significant places remain constant points of reference, where the senses of the sacred are continuously negotiated through the interaction of personal feelings, social relationships, and cultural traditions. The multidimensionality of these ties—rooted in the sensory experience of the sacred at multiple domains of place (e.g., personal, social, and cultural)—illustrates how different aspects of the individual's spiritual life come together to create a profound and lasting connection to the sacred in such places.

TOWARDS A PROCESS MODEL OF SPIRITUAL TIES TO PLACE: AN EMBODIED APPROACH

While STP may be associated with how individuals experience their surroundings through their bodies, the psychological process through which this phenomenon occurs remains unclear. Embodiment framework adds another layer of explanation to how people engage with places spiritually, not just cognitively, but also through their senses, emotions, and actions (Botvinick & Cohen, 1998; Captari et al., 2019, 2023; Ehrsson et al., 2004). The connection between a person and the sacred in a place involves multiple layers of sensory-motor integration, which shape the way we feel, think, and act in relation to that space. These embodied experiences make places feel sacred, thus fostering strong emotional bonds. STP are more than abstract ideas; they are lived, felt, and acted upon, often guiding how people think, feel, and behave within their environments (Garbarini et al., 2015).

Connection: Sensing the Sacred

The first process in the experience of STP involves a sense of connection. People sense the sacredness of a place through their physical and emotional presence in it (Tsakiris et al., 2006). For example, standing in a cathedral, individuals might feel awe as they observe the grandeur of the architecture, hear the echo of footsteps, or smell the incense. These sensory cues invite an emotional connection, making the place feel personally significant. The embodied feeling of connection anchors people to their surroundings, allowing them to feel the place's power and presence (Sposito et al., 2012). This initial emotional response becomes the foundation for deeper spiritual ties.

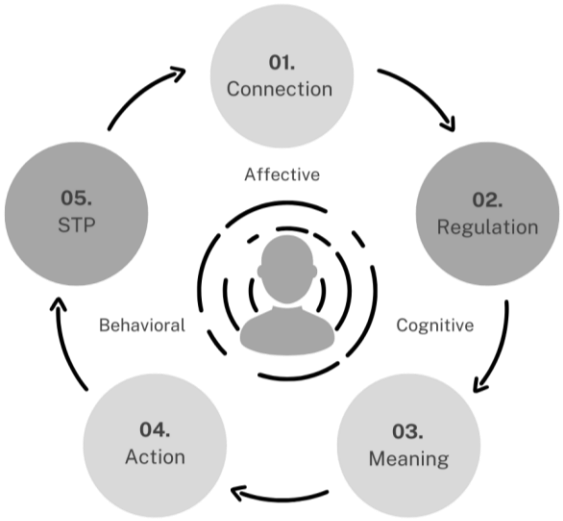

Figure 20.1 Embodied Mechanisms of Spiritual Ties to Place

Regulation: Aligning the Body and Mind

Once people sense a connection to a place, their bodies and minds begin to regulate in response to it. This step involves calming and aligning oneself with the environment. In sacred spaces like temples or natural settings, the stillness and beauty of the place can help living organisms relax, breathe deeply, and focus (D'Alonzo et al., 2014). This bodily regulation is an important aspect of spiritual engagement, as it allows individuals to clear their minds, reduce stress, and prepare for deeper reflection. For example, walking slowly through a peaceful garden or sitting by a calm river can bring about a sense of inner balance. The body adjusts to the rhythms of the place, fostering a sense of the sacred in such a setting.

Meaning: Finding Significance in Place

As individuals regulate their bodies and minds, they start to derive meaning from the place. This meaning-making process engages with the cognitive and affective dimensions. People begin to reflect on what the place represents to them—whether it symbolizes hope, healing, or connection to something greater than themselves (Garbarini et al., 2015). For example, a person might visit a sacred mountain and feel that the experience connects them to their cultural heritage, linking them to past generations who also visited the site. This cognitive process is key to strengthening the spiritual tie, as it transforms the place from just a mere physical location into a meaningful space that carries personal and cultural significance.

Action: Engaging with the Place

Meaning leads to action. People who feel spiritually tied to a place often express their connection through behaviors that honor and protect it. For instance, indigenous communities may perform rituals to honor the sacredness of their ancestral lands, or environmental activists may engage in conservation efforts to preserve a natural site they find spiritually meaningful (Ehrsson et al., 2004). These actions reflect the behavioral dimension of STP, showing how the embodied experience of a sacred site can inspire people to care for and maintain its integrity. As individuals act in ways that protect or enhance the place, they inadvertently strengthen their bond with it.

STP as an Embodied Process

The spiritual tie to a place is the result of ongoing interaction between sensory experience, emotional connection, cognitive reflection, and behavioral engagement. This embodied process illustrates that STP are not just about thinking or feeling, but about living and acting in relationship with one's environment (Counted et al., 2024; Sposito et al., 2012). For example, pilgrims who repeatedly visit a sacred site often speak of how their repeated journeys strengthen their connection to the place (Klimiuk & Moriarty, 2021). They fill up the space in their bodies, reflect on its meaning, and engage in rituals or acts of care, all of which reinforce their spiritual bond. In sum, STP emerges from embodied experiences that engage multiple psychological dimensions of human life: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. This dynamic and embodied process explains why certain places hold such important significance for individuals and communities. The sacredness of these places is not just an idea—it is something lived and felt through the body, mind, and spirit (Counted & Watts, 2017).

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite the growing interest in understanding STP, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly in how these ties manifest across different cultures and contexts. Future research could explore the variability in STP, examining how individual characteristics (such as personality, life history, etc.) interact with social and cultural factors to shape one’s STP. Empirical studies could also focus on different religious traditions and geographic locations to better understand the universality and particularity of STP. For example, research could investigate how urban versus rural environments impact spiritual connections or how cultural practices influence the types of places deemed sacred (also see Meagher et al., in press). In addition, there is a need to further empirically explore the psychological mechanisms that underlie these ties, including how sensory experiences in sacred places trigger emotional responses and how these responses differ across individuals.

From a practical perspective, an understanding of STP can inform the design of religious spaces and public policies that promote well-being and human flourishing. Urban planners, for instance, could consider how the design of public spaces can facilitate spiritual experiences, while religious communities may benefit from designing environments that enhance social bonding and the depth of their community’s spiritual connection to it. Lastly, understanding the uniqueness of specific aspects of STP could help religious leaders and mental health professionals better support individuals who may feel disconnected from their sacred places due to life changes or external disruptions.

CONCLUSION

STP is a profound and complex phenomenon that connects individuals to the sacred at multiple domains of place (e.g., personal, social, cultural) through several psychological processes (e.g., affective, cognitive, behavioral, sensory). These ties offer individuals not only a sense of spiritual fulfillment but also a source of emotional security, social belonging, and cultural identity. As this chapter has demonstrated, significant places are much more than physical locations; they can be embodied sites where personal spirituality, communal practices, and cultural narratives converge to evoke the sensing of the sacred or connection to the divine. Whether experienced in a grand cathedral, a quiet forest, or a small home shrine (Meagher et al., in press), the spiritual ties that people form with these significant places have lasting effects on their lives, shaping their sense of purpose, community, and identity. Future research and practical applications should continue to explore how these ties can be nurtured to promote flourishing across individuals and communities.

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