

ATTACHMENT TO THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF PLACES¹

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Summary.—Social relationships have been important in explanation and prediction of attachment to places. Although some have asserted the importance of physical aspects of the environment in the formation of attachment ties to a place, the social environment is required for the formation of bonds to a place, although strong emphasis on the social aspect has been questioned and the importance of the physical environment noted. The present objective in two studies was to test whether college students ($n_s = 30$ and 27) show a preference for a place they know, independently of the social interactions developed in them. Results confirmed the hypothesis, i.e., after a very brief stay in a certain place with nobody else there, these college students preferred that place to another with which they had not had previous contact.

Attachment to places concerns the interrelations between persons and environments, such as in environmental psychology, geography, or urban sociology, are analyzed. After a period in which terminological and conceptual confusion was a serious obstacle to progress (Lalli, 1992; Giuliani & Feldman, 1993), certain consensus has been reached. The definition of place attachment offered by several authors is “a positive affective bond or association between individuals and their residential environment” (Shumaker & Taylor, 1983, p. 233). Although this definition may be appropriate to describe this special feeling toward certain places, Hidalgo and Hernández (2001) reported it does not allow differentiation from other closely related concepts such as, for example, residential satisfaction. For this reason, we have considered it necessary to delimit the concept further, by adding an element that would be the main characteristic of the concept of attachment: the desire to remain close to that object (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Thus, the definition of place attachment would be a positive affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such a place (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). In our opinion, this desire for proximity is the main characteristic of place attachment which allows us to differentiate it from closely related concepts. So, it seems pertinent to stress this quality in the definition and description.

Another discussion has concerned whether place attachment is focused on the places or whether it is directed toward the people living in them. We

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find proponents of both views. For example, Low and Altman (1992) considered places are the contexts within which interpersonal relationships occur, and "it is to those social relationships, not just to place qua place, to which people are attached" (p. 7). Other authors have asserted, without denying the contributions of social attachment, the importance of the physical environment in the formation of attachment bonds. For example, Riger and Lavrakas (1981) and Taylor, Gottfredson, and Brower (1985) identified the existence of two dimensions or 'types' of neighborhood attachment, rootedness or physical attachment and bonding or social attachment. Mesch and Manor (1998) found satisfaction with the physical characteristics of the environment to be a predictor of place attachment. Hidalgo (1998) also reported empirical evidence that people feel attachment toward the physical aspects of places and that this attachment remains even after controlling for the effect of the social component.

However, in this case, as in most research on the physical dimension of place attachment, one could assert that physical attachment is developed as a consequence of social attachment. That is, the attachment we feel toward a certain place could be the fruit of the experiences and social interactions we develop in such places. In fact, this is what some authors claim (Chawla, 1992; Cooper Marcus, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992). Rather than deny the existence of physical attachment, they explain it as deriving from social attachment. The fact that one of the main predictors of neighborhood attachment is the social relationships established there, has, among other factors, led to the idea that social relationships are a kind of requirement for attachment to place. In this research whether people show a preference for known places independently of the social interactions developed in them was assessed.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants.—Thirty college students (12 men, 18 women), whose average age was 19 yr., participated voluntarily.

Procedure.—The procedure was expressly developed for this study. The experiment was carried out in a room in which no participant had previously been. This rectangular room, approximately 8 × 4 m, had no windows. It contained a rectangular table placed in the centre with a chair on each side, so was the same distance between the door and each chair. The experimenter asked the participants to come into the room, one at a time, telling them that they were to perform a test. Inside the room the participants found the paper with the test and a pen on the table, next to one of the two chairs. Two conditions were established in such a way that half of the participants found the test next to one of the chairs and the other half next to the

other one. They were given 4 min. to carry out the test, then they left the room. Subsequently, to check where in the room they would place themselves, the students were asked to come back for a moment while the test was checked to give them scores. Recorded was whether they chose the place they had previously sat or some other. Once the data were recorded, the participants were thanked for their participation and discharged.

Thus, the dependent variable was the seating choice of participants the second time they entered the room. We were interested in whether they would choose the initial place or another. Therefore, the initial placement of the participants was manipulated as the independent variable (Place A and Place B). Two chairs were used. The independent variable was blocked by means of counterbalancing to evaluate the dependent variable in relation to an external probability criterion. The starting hypothesis was that participants would show preference for a place they have been on their own, that is, in the total absence of social relationships.

Results

The number of people who sat in the place they had been before and those who chose any other place were expressed as percent. Those who occupied the same place were 92.6% of the total in comparison to 3.7% who chose another place in the room. A Z test for mutually exclusive categories was 11.11 ($p < .001$). Another 3.7% were omitted for various reasons.

Discussion

The results indicate that people develop an elementary form of preference for physical spaces, even in the absence of social relationships. As we have seen, a brief contact with a certain place is sufficient for it to be favored after a short time over another. The question that arises is whether we can consider such a preference a form of place attachment. There is no doubt that the observed phenomenon is not the usual description of place attachment. These focus mainly on the house or the neighborhood and involve a complex and multidimensional concept of place attachment. However, many authors acknowledge the possibility of developing attachment towards smaller spatial dimensions (Sarbin, 1983; Belk, 1992; Low, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992). Also, we have described place attachment as a tendency to remain close to a place, to prefer certain places to others, to return to the same place, etc. This is indeed what we observed in this situation. When participants came into the room again, they tended to return to the same place they have occupied before.

In any case, the procedure used in this study might present some limitations. A question that immediately arises is whether attachment is the reason participants returned to the same place they had previously sat. In spite of this explanation being likely, there is at least one other alternative expla-

nation. Given that the first time the participants came into the room the place to sit was indicated (albeit in an indirect way by leaving the test next to one of the chairs), we cannot dismiss the possibility that the participants sat in the same place as before in response to an inferred social "authority effect." As we said before, this manipulation was done to control the effect of possible initial preferences of the participants for one of the two chairs (light, orientation, etc.), which would have made it difficult to attribute their behavior to attachment. However, this manipulation has the drawback mentioned. To avoid this, we carried out a second study.

STUDY 2

To control a possible effect of inferred authority, we carried out Study 2, similar to the previous one, except that in this case participants were allowed to choose the place to sit without any prompting. In this way, the possible influence of external criteria in the subject's choice was better controlled. On the other hand, we also raised the issue of what would happen if the participants went back to the room after a longer period of time had elapsed. We were interested in seeing whether the preference would remain after a longer period of time. Therefore, we made another modification to this second phase of the study and added a second measurement of the dependent variable 24 hours after the first one.

Method

Participants.—Psychology students (10 men, 17 women) participated voluntarily. Their average age was 25 yr. Three of them had to be excluded before the analysis due to unforeseen problems during the study, so the final sample was made up of 24 participants.

Design.—The participants chose the place in which they sat from the start. In this way, we have a quasi-experiment in which the assigned variable is the place participants initially sat, and the dependent variable is the place they sat later. Two measurements of the dependent variable were taken; one was immediate, and the other was delayed by 24 hours.

Procedure.—The procedure was similar to that of the previous study. The difference was that in this case the place they were to sit was not predetermined. They were simply shown into the room, and they chose between the two chairs. After the first 13 participants, the chairs were rotated, always making sure that the same distance between the two chairs and the door was maintained. Once the test was finished, the participants were asked to go into the room again. At that moment they were told that the questionnaire had a second part that they should answer the following day. All participants agreed to return. In this way we had a second opportunity to measure the dependent variable 24 hours later.

Results

In the first and immediate measurement of the dependent variable, the percentage of participants who sat in the same place was 92% compared to 8% who chose another place in the room ($Z=7.58, p < .001$). This effect was replicated for the second measure, 24 hours later, although it was slightly attenuated. In this case, 75% chose the same place and 25% a different one ($Z=2.83, p < .003$). Regarding the effect of the delay, more participants sat in the same place when the test stage was carried out immediately than they did 24 hours later (Wilcoxon $Z=2.0, p < .05$).

Discussion

As we observed, the preference for a place previously occupied remains after eliminating the possible influence of authority. According to the results, a majority of people choose the place they occupied before, and this effect persisted for at least 24 hours afterwards, although in an attenuated way. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a significant effect after a delay also supports the hypothesis that they sat down in the same place due to attachment rather than for another preference, such as lighting, etc., since, in such a case, there would be no reason for that preference to attenuate with time.

It could be argued that the preference observed in these studies is not attachment, since we cannot really talk of affective bonds or of a desire to remain close to the place in the room, although these are part of the definition of the concept. Indeed, the affect participants may feel toward the place they have occupied during these studies should be minimal, but so is the time they remained there. It seems logical to assume that the greater experience of and contact with a certain place can increase the affect we can feel toward it. But we can also interpret the preference for one of the two chairs as a form of affect. We have classic investigations in social psychology which support the hypothesis that participants develop some kind of affect toward the place they have occupied. We refer to the studies of Zajonc (1968, 1980; Murphy & Zajonc, 1993; Murphy, Monahan, & Zajonc, 1995) on the effect of mere exposure. In a long series of experiments, Zajonc and his colleagues demonstrated that simple exposure to a stimulus is followed by a more favorable valuation of the given stimulus and that this affective reaction can be evoked with minimal stimulus input and no apparent cognitive processing. Although in our study we cannot talk about an affective bond similar to the one developed toward more significant places, such as a house or neighborhood, as have Zajonc and colleagues, we have enough evidence to consider that there is a more positive evaluation of one place in the room than another.

The tendency to remain close to a place (the main characteristic of place attachment according to our definition) is what we observed in the par-

ticipants' behavior who tended to sit or get close to the same chair they had occupied briefly before. Once in the room, the participants tended to return to that place rather than to another. Obviously, outside the room they might well have other preferred places. But, in fact, when the choice was between a known and an unknown place, these people preferred to remain near the first one, and this happened independently of any social relationships being developed in such place. Obviously, this attachment is minimal, and in many aspects it is difficult to compare it to the kind of attachment developed toward other daily and more relevant places for subjects. However, what we have tried to do is to detect the minimal conditions for attachment to place to begin. The addition of other factors to these minimal conditions would make this initial preference more meaningful.

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