

Church, couch, couple: Social psychological connections between people and physical space

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Credit: Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Societies and people have reshaped the world many times over. From building cities and communities that live within them, to the smaller changes in a person's home or place of worship, people influence their space. Benjamin Meagher, a social psychologist at Hope College, argues that the space people shape, also shapes the individual, and that social psychology must take an "ecological" view of people in their environment.

His work appears in a recently published paper in *Personality and Social*

Psychology Review.

Being in a certain location dramatically constrains or facilitates certain [emotional experience](#) (stepping into a quiet St. Patrick's Cathedral from the busy streets of New York), our sense of connection with others (moving in with a romantic partner for the first time, or returning to your childhood home for a holiday), and our productivity and performance (the well-documented effect of home advantage in sports).

"There is no such thing as neutral, empty space-wherever you are, you are in a particular place that has psychological meaning," says Meagher.

For researchers, this means that understanding what role different places play in psychological experience is an important goal, because it can provide insights for better designing environments to promote psychological well-being and more positive social interaction.

"It's time for psychologists to move outside the head of the individual to consider the broader context in which psychological activity takes place," says Meagher.

Much of social and personality psychology research, and psychology in general, looks at how we feel and think in our minds, as well as how we react to specific situations, but Meagher suggests that we are often ignoring an equally important part of the health and wellbeing equation: our physical environment.

Couples on Couches

One example Meagher offers is that of couples in their homes. One pair are film buffs, they've focused their resources to a comfy couch and a large screen. Another pair, into food, has focused much of their resources on a kitchen that allows them to cook unique meals. The

changes the couple make to their homes reflect their personalities, but it will also reinforce those aspects of their personalities.

Having a home that reflects a shared identity and facilitates joint activities can help support the couple. Yet, if the people in the partnership have different interests, trying to share the same space may cause conflict. Sometimes couples might even create their own spaces in such a situation. Meagher says that the "man cave" is one example of how people may strategically alter a physical environment in order to support a particular aspect of their personality that they may feel is otherwise hindered by their [home](#).

How people shape their spaces can also impact the psychological wellbeing beyond the individual.

The Community Connection

Earlier research on college dormitories, hospitals, and nursing homes has shown that certain designs such as suite vs. apartment layouts, influence how often people interact, and how much they feel like they belong in that community (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Devlin, Donovan, Nicolov, Nold, & Zandan, 2008; Dijkstra, Pieterse, & Pruyn, 2006; Ullán *et al.*, 2012).

By understanding the ecology of social interaction psychologists can help architects, city planners, interior designers, and other specialists in applied fields design places that can promote healthier behavior and more positive experiences among occupants. Doing so requires studying what patterns of interactions appear to be supported or inhibited by particular types of environmental design.

More information: Benjamin R. Meagher, *Ecologizing Social Psychology: The Physical Environment as a Necessary Constituent of*

Social Processes, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1088868319845938](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868319845938)

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