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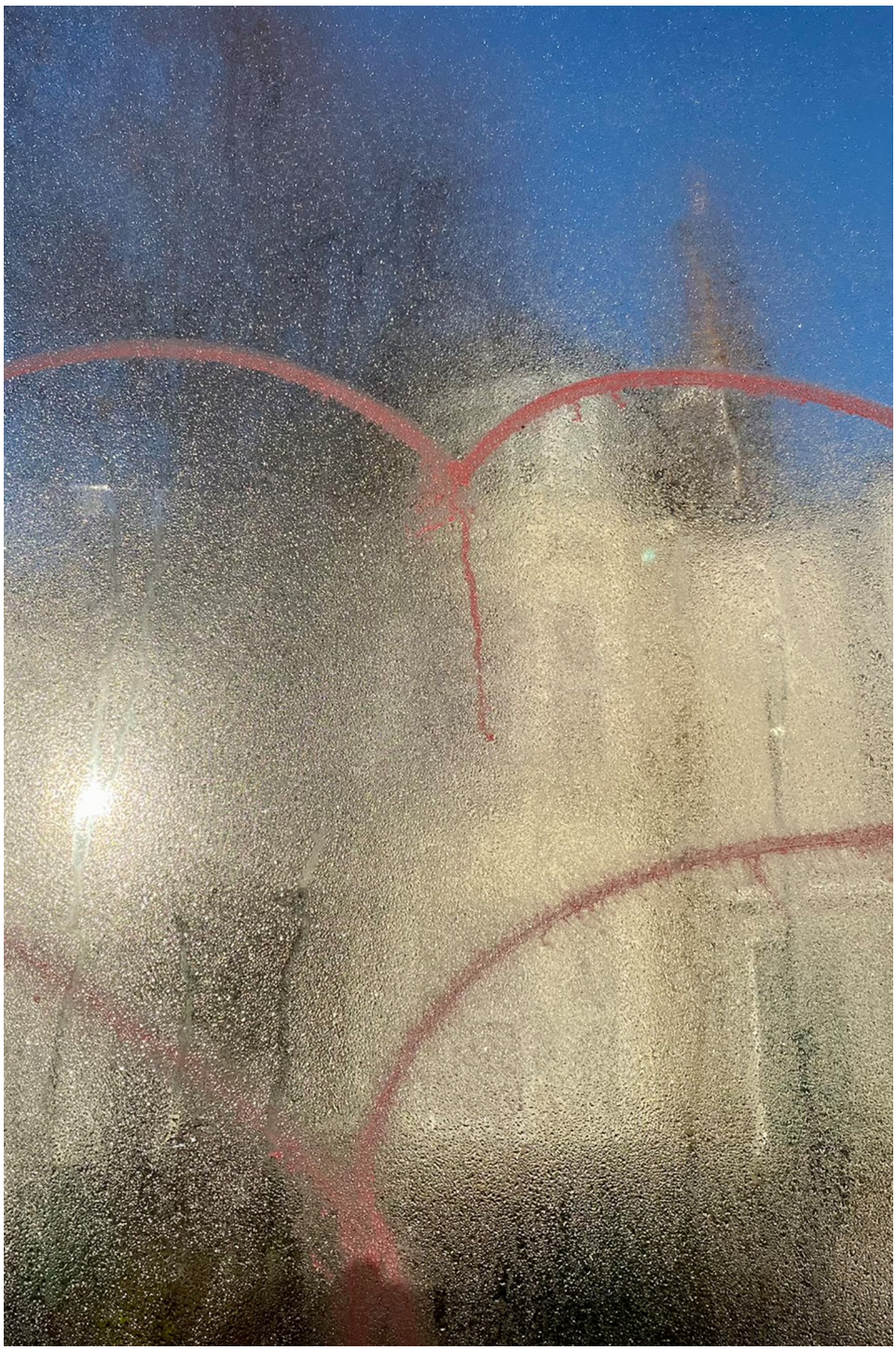
How places affect well-being



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Introduction

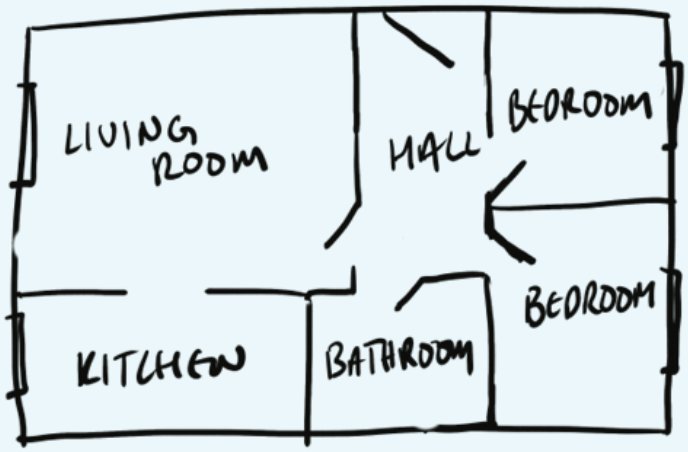
Welcome to this short course looking at the relationship between places and well-being. Before you get stuck into the research in this area, start with the first activity.

Activity 1: Emotion mapping

20 minutes

Emotion mapping is a technique used in both therapy and research to understand how people relate to the places they live in. Have a go at producing an emotion map yourself following the instructions below.

1. Draw a simple map of your home.



2. Now think through a typical week in your home. Pick up to three emotions represented by the emotions below, representing laughter, happiness, indifference, sadness, upset, grumpiness/anger, and love/affection. Now draw these emotions on your map, in the places where you remember feeling the emotions you have chosen.

3. Now look at where you've placed your emoticons. Are there any patterns? What might this tell you about how the way that people feel is influenced by their environment?

Discussion

In the original study this task is based upon, the sociologist Jacqui Gabb asked families to complete this task over the course of a week. She found that the families reported different emotions happening in different parts of the house.

Arguments, for instance, were particularly likely to happen in the doorway of teenager's bedrooms. Both arguments and strong positive emotions happened in the kitchen and shared living spaces. You can probably think of some reasons why this might be. A teenager's bedroom is an important territory for them and the doorway is a border between the shared space of the home and the teenager's own territory. Living rooms and kitchens are more communal spaces, whereas bedrooms might have more experiences of contentment and calm, but fewer joyful or fun experiences.

What this kind of exercise demonstrates is the way in which people's emotions and psychological experiences are *located*. The way that people feel is not only driven by their internal thoughts and feelings, but also is made possible, shaped and limited by the environments that people live in.

In this course you will learn about some of the evidence from psychology and other areas of research that has tried to understand the relationship between places and how people feel.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- describe features of buildings that have been shown to impact people’s well-being
- describe features of cities and neighbourhoods that have been shown to impact people’s well-being
- outline some psychological mechanisms thought to be important in linking people’s environments and their experiences of well-being.
- outline some of the considerations for designing and planning places to enhance people’s well-being.

1 What kinds of places are better or worse for well-being?

The kind of place a person lives in has been found to influence their well-being.

In this first section of the course, you will first learn about some of the research on how the neighbourhood someone lives in affects their mental health. After this, you will learn about research that has looked at how the details of buildings can impact well-being.

1.1 Neighbourhoods

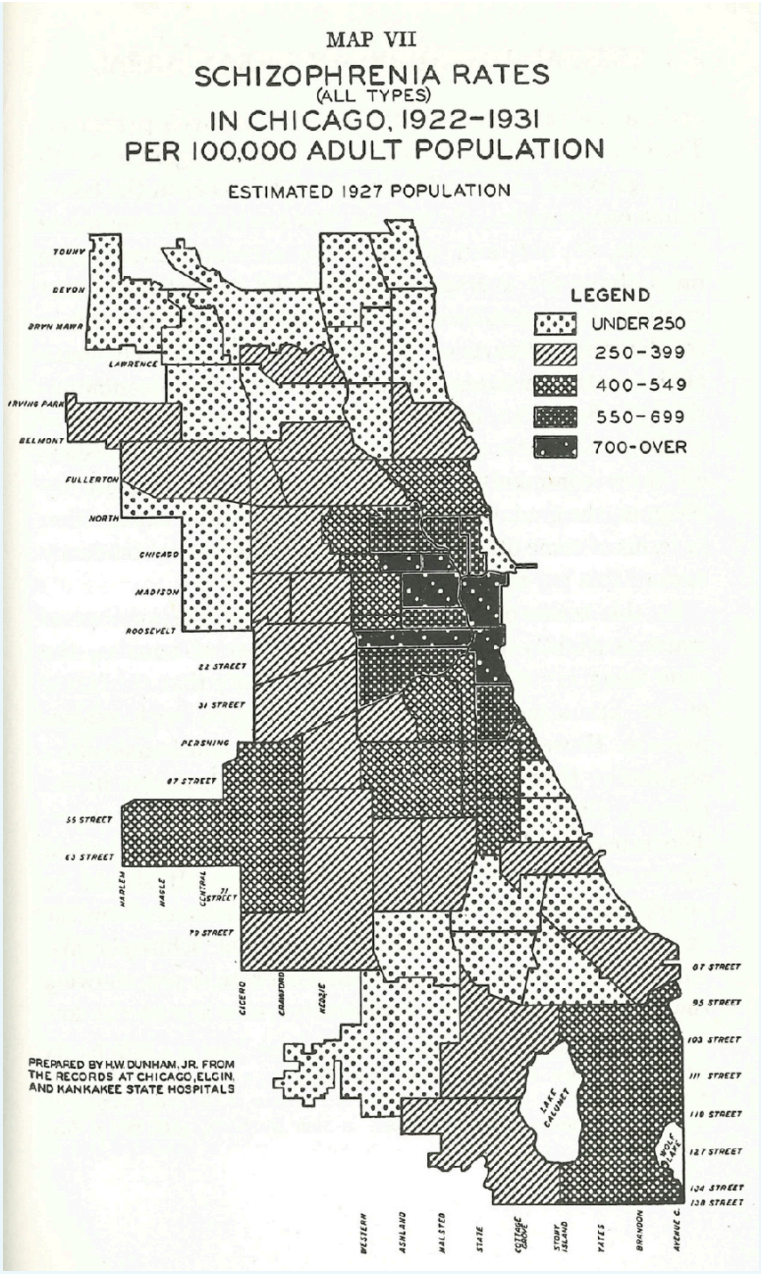
Some of the earliest research indicating that the neighbourhood someone lives in can influence their mental health was done in Chicago, US in the 1930s. Like a lot of the evidence about what kinds of effects places have on people, this research looked at people's experiences of mental health problems, rather than more positive experiences of well-being. This is a general bias in psychological research, which tends to focus on negative experiences.

Faris and Dunham (1939) mapped the incidence of schizophrenia, a serious mental health condition, across the city of Chicago. They found that these people diagnosed with schizophrenia were concentrated in some areas of the city. Complete the activity below to explore their work in more detail.

Activity 2: Schizophrenia in the city

15 minutes

Below is the original Faris and Dunham map of Chicago. Where are the most incidents of schizophrenia? What kinds of areas do you think these might be?



Discussion

Faris and Dunham identified that people diagnosed with schizophrenia were most likely to live in the central areas of the city, and that incidence decreased in the outer suburbs. This pattern has been found in many other places across the world in subsequent studies. In 2012, researchers looked at all the available data from studies looking at urban areas and schizophrenia incidence together, in a type of study called a ‘meta-analysis’. They found that when all the data was combined together, the risk for developing schizophrenia was 2.37 times higher in the most urban environments compared to the most rural environments.

There are a few possible explanations for this pattern. You may be thinking that poverty is an obvious explanation for mental health issues being more centred in the inner city. It is well known that there is a ‘social gradient’ in mental health diagnoses, meaning that people who are poorer are more likely to experience mental health difficulties. Poorer people are also more concentrated in inner-city areas. A limitation of this explanation, however, is that there is also a lot of poverty in rural areas, but the same level of poverty in a rural area does not seem to translate into the same risk for schizophrenia.

Another explanation could be that people who are diagnosed with schizophrenia might become poor due to their difficulties, and might end up in poorer urban areas, elevating the numbers. This is known as the ‘social drift’ hypothesis. People with serious mental health problems certainly do face difficulties with employment and are poorer on average.

There is, however, also evidence that the conditions of the neighbourhood itself play a role, independently of these personal factors. A Danish study that tracked people from birth found that being born in an urban inner-city area increased a person’s chance of developing schizophrenia in adulthood by 2.4 times, compared to being born in a rural area (Mortenson et al, 1999). This figure of between two and two and a half times more likely to develop schizophrenia is pretty much consistent across all studies that have looked at the relationship between urban areas and serious mental health issues (Pignon et al., 2023).

In the later sections of this course, you will explore some of the ways that researchers think that places impact mental health – both negatively, as seen in this example, and positively. First, you can learn in the next section about some more specific features of buildings and design that have been found to influence how people feel when living in their homes.

1.2 Buildings, housing and design features

There is also evidence that the design of buildings can influence people’s well-being. Complete the activity below to learn more about this area of research.

Activity 3: Buildings and well-being

25 minutes

Below are some comparisons of architectural features that have been shown to impact well-being or mental health. For each pair, see if you can pick which is better for well-being and think about why this might be:

Pair 1: Open deck versus closed corridor

Look at the following images and think about which **layout** you think would be better for well-being, and why. Try not to be influenced by which you think looks better or is more to your taste. Think about where the doors are placed and the fact that one is indoors and the other is outdoors.

Answer

You might have thought that the ‘open deck’ set up has some advantages as it has a direct view of the outdoors and more natural light in the corridor. There are benefits of being able to see nature from your home, which you will learn about in a later section. The left-hand corridor arrangement, however, has surprising well-being benefits. Weich and colleagues (2002) found that people living on closed corridors knew their neighbours better and had better mental health overall, than people living in flats with an open deck. Generally, housing that makes it easier to interact with neighbours is associated with lower levels of loneliness.

Pair 2: lower floor versus upper floor

Living in which of these flats do you think would be better for well-being?

Answer

You may have thought here about how living on a higher floor could give a better view and sense of space. Or you may have thought about the ease of getting in and out of the flat, especially if lifts are not reliable. For parents with young children, it

has been consistently found that this latter issue is more important. Freeman (2008) found that women with young children who lived on higher floors in multi-occupancy buildings had worse mental health than those on the lower floors. They explain this pattern in terms of isolation and access to facilities. Being higher up a building makes it harder to get out to the playground or socialise. Some urban planners have tried to address these issues. In Vienna, for example, many apartment blocks have been built with small play areas that are observable from inside the flats.

Pair 3: intrusive noise versus calmer noise

Imagine that the two sounds played here are the main experience of noise inside someone's home. How do you think these would affect a person's well-being?

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 1: A busy street in Milan with sirens

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 2: Sounds from a busy street from an open window in Florence

Answer

You probably thought here that the quieter noise would be better for well-being, and the research supports that view. A study carried out in Australia found that intrusive noise at home increased people's experiences of both anxiety and depression, having the biggest effect of any housing feature. Natural light, on the other hand, was found to affect people's levels of depression and loneliness (Bower et al, 2021). There is also some evidence that quality of housing also plays a role in people's well-being, such as living in a home that is well repaired, or has mould (Beemer et al, 2021).

There is not, however, a completely straightforward relationship between the quality, size or tenure (whether people rent or own their home) of a person's home and their well-being. This is because people's relationship to their homes is complicated and depends on lots of other factors in the person's life. People spend different amounts of time at home and use home space in a wide variety of ways. Bower et al (2021) for instance found that in the COVID-19 pandemic people talked about how they had suddenly noticed lots of issues with their homes that they usually did not notice. Living in a noisy flat, for instance, is a different experience if a person spends most of their time out of the house at work, socialising, at the gym, or elsewhere.

Control is also thought to be an important factor in how much people are impacted by the features of their homes (Evans et al, 2003). This could perhaps explain why noise can have such as an effect on mental health and well-being. The definition of 'noise' is an unwanted or unpleasant sound; it is inherently an experience of being out of control of the auditory environment.

Pair 4: nature views versus no nature views

Which window view do you think would be better for well-being?

Answer

There is quite a lot of evidence that access to – or even views of – nature can play an important role in people's well-being. Globally, it's been found that people living in places with more green space (e.g. parks) have better mental health. People who spend more time in their local green spaces have also been found to report better mental health and 'vitality' (feeling well and vigorous) than people who used the green spaces less (van den Berg et al., 2016). As with the neighbourhood findings above, however, there are a few possible explanations for these relationships. Firstly, richer areas of cities tend to also be greener, so these studies could be picking up the social gradient in mental health. Secondly, it could be that people who are healthier and happier are more likely to have the energy to be active and use their green spaces, so it's not clear that green space *causes* an increase in well-being from these studies.

Other studies have tried to pinpoint these relationships more precisely. In a classic study, Ulrich and colleagues (1984) compared the recovery rates of hospital patients in the US who had a view of nature from their window with those who did not. They found that patients with a nature view had shorter hospital stays and required fewer painkillers than those who had a view of a brick wall. This is better evidence, because in other ways the patients were very similar, so the study isolated the impact of the view of nature. You will learn a bit more about the research on nature and well-being in Section 2.

In this section you have learned about some of the features of the built environment that have been found to influence well-being. In the next section, you will learn more about *why* these features have these impacts.

2 How do places affect people’s well-being?

So far in this course you have learned about some of the evidence that places – from neighbourhoods to buildings – play a role in people’s mental health and well-being. In this section, you will learn about some of the key mechanisms that researchers think are responsible for this relationship.

2.1 Emotion and cognition in nature

In Activity 4, you learned about the evidence that views of nature seem to have a positive impact on people's well-being. There are different theories as to why this might be.

Some researchers have focused on the emotional experience of nature. People have been found to experience feelings of 'awe' in natural environments, meaning a feeling of wonder and reverence in the face of something greater than themselves (Van Cappellen & Rime, 2013). Feelings of awe have been found to be particularly strong when people are absorbed or captivated by a natural scene. Awe involves a sense of being connected to the wider world and has a function of taking the person outside of themselves, known as experiencing a 'small self' (Bai et al, 2017). Feeling connected is a vital part of well-being, while a 'small self' seems to help shift people's attention away from their individual concerns and towards other people. Focusing and ruminating on problems is well-established to be something that can prolong and deepen experiences of both anxiety and depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000).

Another major area of research has looked at the impact that nature can have on the way that people think, known as 'cognition.' The aspect of thinking of most interest here is *attention*. Attention means a state of conscious focus. If you think about *paying attention* to something you might be listening hard, or reading something in a concentrated way, or following a particular event or story in the news. Something that you are not *paying attention* to, on the other hand, is still happening but it is outside of your awareness.

Psychologists who study attention tend to think of this both as a skill and a resource. People can train themselves to be able to sustain attention for longer, for instance through mindfulness training. There is also evidence that people's capacity for attention can be worn out or drained by overuse, as well as restored by rest. This is where nature comes in. The earliest research in this area, by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) compared how well

people's attention was restored by looking either built environment or natural scenes. They found that after viewing natural scenes, people performed better on tests measuring attention than the city scenes. In the following activity you will learn about a study that looked at these processes in everyday life.

Activity 4: Coping with difficult life events

15 minutes

In a study from the early 2000s, Frances Kuo worked with women living in a social housing estate ('a project') in Chicago, US. In this estate, residents were housed in tower blocks, pictured below. Some of the blocks had no trees surrounding them (pictured on the left) and some blocks were surrounded by trees (pictured on the right).

This provided a comparison between women whose everyday views from their home included nature, and those who did not. This is known as a 'natural experiment' – when something in the world provides a comparison between two groups who are otherwise similar.

1. Kuo compared women living in these blocks on measures of attention and memory. From what you know of the research in this area, who would you predict performed better on these tests?

Provide your answer...

Answer

The women who could see trees performed better on these tests. This finding seems to support the idea that views of nature, even limited, can help to restore cognitive capacities including attention.

2. In the study, women were asked about the difficulties they faced in their everyday life. This could include money problems, relationship difficulties, parenting issues, and other everyday stresses and strains.

The women had similar levels of difficult life events, but the women with a view of trees rated these events as less important and less long-lasting than the women with no view of trees.

How could you explain this difference, using the concepts you've learned about in this course?

Provide your answer...

Answer

This finding implies that while both groups of women had the same level of difficult life events, as women navigating living in poverty, these issues seemed to weigh less heavily on women who had a view of nature in their daily view. Kuo explains this finding as showing that nature can restore attention, leaving more cognitive capacity to deal with ongoing life issues and cope with them more easily. You may have also thought about the emotional impacts of nature discussed above – particularly the way that nature is thought to produce feelings of a 'small self' where a person might ruminate less on their individual concerns. This pattern seems to track with women rating their problems as less important when they were able to view trees.

In the next section you will learn about the role of relationships in people's experience of places and environments.

2.2 Relationships, connections and community

An important mechanism proposed for the relationship between places and well-being is that places that better facilitate strong relationships, connection and community lead to better well-being. Some of the research you learned about in the previous section

implicitly highlighted this, for instance that designs which enable people to talk to their neighbours more easily seem to be better for mental health.

One way that researchers have tried to understand the relationship between relationships and well-being is by looking at what kinds of environments lead people to be lonelier. Loneliness is feeling that a person’s relationships are not sufficient to meet their needs. There is not an objective measure of loneliness, a certain number of relationships or type of connections that mean that a person is or is not lonely. The quality of relationships is more important than quantity. Some people can feel lonely despite having many friends while others can be content in relative solitude.

The relationship between places and loneliness is similarly subjective and variable. When reviewing all the published studies that looked at relationships between the built environment and loneliness published in the twenty-first century, Bower and colleagues (2023) found that there was no one kind of place that could prevent loneliness in everyone. There were, however, lots of ways in which built environments influenced loneliness and the quality of people’s relationships. One example was that people living in smaller apartments were found to be lonelier, a relationship explained by the fact that smaller homes made it harder to host friends and family. On a larger scale, having access to better amenities and transport was found to be positive for loneliness, due to the fact that people were able to access activities and facilities out of the home more easily.

One conclusion it would be possible to draw from this research is that it’s crucial to build places that enable people to interact as much as possible with those around them. It’s not quite this simple, however, as there are also some negative impacts of contact with others. Early work in this area was carried out by Altman (1975), who suggested that people feel crowded when their sense of personal space and territory is violated, and that this is made worse if they feel watched by others. He suggested that people respond to feeling crowded by withdrawing, and if this is not possible, they can become distressed. These needs change and shift, meaning that the design of housing also needs to be flexible and allow for people to both find privacy and be sociable.

You may have noticed that the research above is not solely about the architectural features of the buildings. Also involved is how people live in the buildings, and the level of control they have over the space. These physical, social and psychological components of the experience of living in a particular place all inter-relate and interact with each other in complicated ways.

It is clear from these examples that the relationship between the environment and people’s experience is hard to pin down. One concept that is often used to understand the relationship between the physical environment and psychological experience is ‘affordance’. This is a concept from the psychologist Eleanor Gibson, writing in the 1960s and 1970s. ‘Afford’ means ‘make possible’ and it can be helpful to think about the relationship between the built or physical environment and people’s lives. Complete Activity 6 to learn more about this idea.

Activity 5: Affordances of water

15 minutes

Think of a body of water such as the one above. Now list all the possible ways that a person could interact with this water. What kinds of activities could they do? How might they feel or react to the water?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have listed the following activities: swim, wash, drink, or potentially even drown. All of these are valid answers and notice how different they are. These are all activities that the presence of a body of water *makes possible* (or affords) for a person who encounters the water.

Let us take the example of a person washing in the water. Notice that there is nothing inherent in the water or the person that makes the outcome of washing inevitable. The way the person *uses* the water is what matters. At the same time, the ability of the person to wash is dependent on the water existing and being in this place. The final outcome – person washing – is dependent on both the person and the environment, it happens because of the way that these two come together in a particular place and for a particular purpose. This sense of contingency is what the concept of affordance captures.

This is why it is a useful idea for understanding the relationship between people and their environments. There is nothing inevitable about how a person will feel or think when they are in a particular place. Building environments in particular ways,

however, can make some experiences more likely, easier to have – more possible – than other kinds of built environments. Having a shared landing space in a building, for example, makes it easier and more likely that someone will bump into their neighbours and over time build up a relationship with them. This in turn can mean that they feel less lonely and more connected. The landing space *affords* more interaction than a long corridor where people do not stop in the same place. It does not guarantee this outcome, however, and the evidence seems to suggest that no architectural feature can guarantee a psychological outcome.

As well as the kinds of relationships that places can afford for the residents, there is also evidence that the meaning attributed to places and the people who live in them plays a role in well-being. You will learn about this in the next section.

2.3 Status, value and power

An important mechanism that has been proposed for understanding the ways that places affect well-being is the value and status given to places, and the power that people have to impact their environment. Complete Activity 7 to learn more about this research.

Activity 6: Power and status

15 minutes

Make a list of ways in which you think that the value and status of places might impact people's well-being. You might want to think about places that are considered to be higher status or lower status.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

There are many directions you could have gone in to answer this question. You may have thought about places that have high status could give people a sense of worth to live in, while those places that feel low status or abandoned could be less helpful for mental health.

There is certainly evidence that places which people feel are less well looked after tend to be bad for people's mental health. This includes places with high levels of visible crime and vandalism (Ross, Mirowsky & Pribesh 2001). People who feel like they have less say over their neighbourhoods also have been found to have worse mental health. Having a feeling of being disempowered, and not able to make changes that could improve the area that the person lives in seems to make a difference, over and above the issues that a neighbourhood might have objectively. Comparison and a feeling of where someone is in society seem to also play a role. One study in South Africa found that between two communities of comparable levels of deprivation there were higher levels of dissatisfaction and distress in the community which was located on a hill overlooking a rich neighbourhood as opposed to the other area surrounded by neighbourhoods of similar wealth (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2003).

> Emotions connected to a lack of status or feeling undervalued are consistently linked with poor mental health, including humiliation, shame and status anxiety. These are all emotions which include a moral judgement, of being worthwhile and valued members of society. Classic work by George Brown and colleagues, for instance, found that women who faced repeated experiences of humiliation combined with severe loss trebled their chance of being diagnosed with Clinical Depression.

In this section you have learned about some of the potential mechanisms proposed for the relationship between people and their environments. Now that you have a picture of the research, move to the next section to apply some of these ideas.

3 Designing happier places

In this course you have learned about some of the ways in which people might be impacted by the places they live in. How could these be used to help build and create happier places?

In this section you will think about some different aspects of places and how they might be designed or organised to maximise people's well-being. [Editor: H5p image slider]

Pictured here are two housing estates in London made up of multi-story towers, built in a similar architectural style, known as brutalism. The Barbican Centre, on the left, is an expensive and highly desirable place to live. Many residents are attracted to live there specifically because of its architecture. On the right is the Aylesbury Estate in South London, which has been repeatedly used by politicians as a prime example of failed urban planning. (It is worth noting that many residents of the Aylesbury Estate strongly object to this characterisation!).

While these two places have similar physical properties, they are assigned a very different social meaning. The Barbican is a high-status place which is often seen as also increasing the status of the people who live there. People who live in housing estates like the Aylesbury, on the other hand, are often stigmatised, looked down upon, and seen as a problem to be solved (Smith, 2025). This example demonstrates that it is never enough to look only at the physical features of a place. These issues of status, value and social meaning are also crucially important in understanding how places affect people.

One marker of how valued a place is could be the amount of care that is taken in its upkeep and in keeping the people who live there safe. Places with high levels of visible crime and vandalism have indeed been found to be worse for people's mental health (Ross, Mirowsky & Pribesh, 2001). Another indicator of social status and power is how easily a person is able to influence decisions about the place where they live. The sociologist Anne Rogers did indeed find that people who feel like they have less say over their neighbourhood also have worse mental health. If a place has problems but people feel more able to fix them, this is perhaps less of an issue for well-being.

Comparison and a feeling of where someone is in society seem to also play a role. One study in South Africa found that between two communities of comparable levels of deprivation there were higher levels of dissatisfaction and distress in the community that was located on a hill overlooking a rich neighbourhood as opposed to the other area surrounded by neighbourhoods of similar wealth (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2003). This example also shows that value and status are always relative. Another example of this pattern is that people in more unequal countries in general have worse mental health than people who live in a country where people's incomes are closer together (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). The dynamics shaping how people feel about the places they live, whether they feel valued, heard or excluded, are therefore complex and in flux, but always important to consider.

Activity 8: Creating restorative cities

15 minutes

Earlier in the course you learned about the ways that urban environments are known to be a risk for mental health. Most people in the work live in cities, so the answer to this problem can't be to get everyone to move to a rural location! Some researchers and designers have instead tried to build in more relaxing elements in city environments.

Watch the following short video from ‘Project DeStress’ led by Dr. Sarah Payne from the University of Surrey. This video is an example from a virtual reality public space that can be modified to see how different aspects of the space affect how people feel. As you watch the video make notes of:

- Which versions of the space you find more and less relaxing.
- What aspects or elements of the space you think most contribute to feelings of relaxation or restoration?

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1: Environment simulator – Project DeStress

Provide your answer...

Answer

You may have noticed the variations in sound – natural sounds, sounds of traffic, and people. You may also have noticed the variations in the amount of greenery present. You have already explored the ways in which views of nature can help well-being, and the ways that sounds in the home can be stressful. In public places, natural sounds, especially birdsong, have been found to be more relaxing than mechanical sounds such as traffic (Payne, 2013). City environments that incorporate natural views and sounds, and include some respite from traffic noise, may therefore be an important tool in creating happier places.

Conclusion

The research on places and well-being is still in development. It is clear that the kinds of places that people build and live in play a significant role in how people feel. This includes details of buildings and public spaces, natural views and sounds, as well as the ways that people are treated, valued and able to meaningfully shape their environments.

If you enjoyed this course, you might want to explore the following Open University courses:

- D110: *Exploring psychological worlds: thinking, feeling, doing*
- K119: *Wellbeing across the lifecourse*
- T24: *Certificate of Higher Education in Children and Families*

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Acknowledgements

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Images

Course image: Graffiti at a bus stop: courtesy Laura McGrath

Emotions Emojis

A map showing the geographical distribution of schizophrenia rates across Chicago neighbourhoods between 1922 and 1931 in Faris, R. E. L., & Dunham, H. W. (1939) *Mental disorders in urban areas: an ecological study of schizophrenia and other psychoses*. Univ. Chicago Press.

Two different corridors, side by side: left: Bernd Dittrich on Unsplash; right: Open Deck Prabal Kumar / Unsplash

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An outdoor space surrounded by nature: courtesy: Laura McGrath

Two photographs, side by side: Attrition Has Left Some Buildings Surrounded Almost Entirely by Concrete and Asphalt and Others With Pockets of Green, Figure 1 from -2001-Coping-with-Poverty-.pdf

Multiple hands coming together: Zacqueline Baldwin / Unsplash

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