NEW ZEALAND GEOGRAPHER

New Zealand Geographer (2011) **67**, 21–24 doi: 10.1111/j.1745-7939.2011.01194.x

Response

Making sense of place through multiple memory systems[1]

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Abstract: The first part of the paper develops the argument that geographers should learn to decompose human memory into its constituent parts because then and then alone will we become attuned to the full range of ways in which we incorporate places into our beings. The second part of the paper articulates Stephen Hill's comments on episodic memory with my recent work on wisdom.

Key words: memory, sense of place, subjectivity, wisdom.

I am grateful to Dr Stephen Hill for the generous and constructive spirit of his commentary on my paper 'On time, place and happiness' (Simandan 2011a). As I was reading his insightful observations on the nature of episodic memory, one telling episode that emerged in my consciousness was that of a debate I had with myself at age 11. The debate was whether to become a geographer or a psychologist. In those days in Romania majoring in psychology required extensive study of biology, which was not exactly my favourite subject, I opted for geography instead. Yet, years after taking all my degrees in geography and becoming employed as a university teacher of geography, my earlier love of psychology re-entered my life with a vengeance, leading to a sustained research programme situated at the intersection of these two disciplines. Indeed, 'On time, place and happiness' should be seen and grasped in the broader context of my recent work on evolutionary reasoning (Simandan 2007), exceptional human performance (Simandan 2008), hot cognition (Simandan 2009a), intelligence (Simandan 2009b), allostatic load (Simandan 2010a), learning environments (Simandan 2011b) and wisdom (Simandan 2011c). The purpose of writing that paper was to open up a dialogue between geographers and psychologists on a problematic of mutual interest, namely the structuring of the subjective experience of time and place as a key determinant of well-being. Unfortunately, many geographers have a caricatured and negative understanding of psychology, as a discipline still in the grip of old-fashioned positivism. Because of this inaccurate mental model, most geographers fail to engage systematically with the psychological literature and therefore, miss the fact that psychology, similar to geography, is a very diverse discipline with schools of thought that range from positivism to feminism, social constructionism and postmodernism. I am therefore particularly grateful to the editor Michael Roche for his far-sighted initiative of inviting a well-respected psychologist to comment on my paper and thereby create a genuine dialogue of interest to both disciplines.

I wrote 'On time, place and happiness' in a richly textured manner, with layers upon layers of meaning. One of these layers revolves around the relationship between memory and people's subjective experience of place. Dr Hill focused his commentary on this particular

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issue, and I am happy for his choice because inherent limitations of space prevented me from analysing that relationship in all its complexity in my original paper. More to the point, the commentary extends the insights from my paper in two very useful directions: the problem of multiple memory systems and the problem of the less obvious function of episodic memory. Let me take these two issues in turn.

The first extension directs our attention to the highly significant fact that 'human memory' is an umbrella term that should be disaggregated into its more elemental components. We need to proceed in two steps. One of these distinguishes two fundamental classes of memory systems: explicit and implicit. The criterion behind this distinction is whether we are aware/conscious of our memories or not. This criterion is particularly important for the problematic of human happiness because we need to be aware of our memories if we want to consciously control them. To the extent that they remain unconscious or implicit, they control us. Indeed, the common denominator of most psychotherapies is the attempt to make conscious that which before was unconscious. With awareness comes the possibility of exercising control over our subjective experience and of nudging our inner states closer to that elusive ideal of happiness and well-being. Hill reminds us that most of our memories are implicit, fact which helps explain the elusive nature of human happiness. The second step in the disaggregation of human memory into its more elemental components takes us beyond the basic distinction implicit memory–explicit memory and provides ever finer distinctions within each of these two major classes. Thus, the Comment reviews work in psychology that identifies five subtypes of implicit memory: conditioning, priming, habituation, sensitisation and procedural memory. As I have recently published a paper on allostatic load (Simandan 2010a), I have been sensitised to see the world through the eyes of a medical geographer and therefore, would add immunological memory as yet another subtype of implicit memory. Every given place is a complex ecology of humans, benign life forms and pathogens. One of the obvious things that can detract from our well-being is having to fight an infection. Metaphorically speaking, infection with some pathogen (virus, bacterium, fungus, etc.) is one of the common but overlooked ways in which a given place may 'exfoliate' into, and therefore reshape, a human being. Since the immune system has a subset of cells dedicated to remembering the identity of previous pathogens, this memory is one of the silent contributors to our long-term well-being (i.e. subsequent reinfections with the same pathogen are less severe than the initial infection).

As for explicit memory, Hill highlights two basic subtypes, namely semantic memory and episodic memory, and reminds readers that most of the analysis in 'On time, place and happiness' is concerned with the latter. However, when all is said and done, why should geographers who study well-being care about how psychologists decompose the complex phenomenon of human memory? Part of the answer is provided by Hill and pertains to the basic psychological fact that a major source of unhappiness takes the form of inner conflicts between our various parts (Hill 2011, p. 17):

> When we, say, experience a particular place, many types of memory will likely to be brought into play and tensions between the different 'stories' that are evoked will themselves generate complex, possibly contradictory feelings about it that may demand further 'cognitive work' by the individual to resolve.

Elsewhere (Simandan 2010b), I pointed to this same issue by arguing for the need to re-conceptualise human *in*dividuals as archipelagos of dividual selves, involved in the difficult task of achieving alignment and congruence among their conflicting selves (or 'islands'). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of depressed people is the inward focus of their attention, suggesting the hypothesis that depression is a failure to achieve inner alignment. Thinking geographically I would notice that the attempt of depressed people to sort out their inner struggles severely limits the scope of their actual engagement with the places in which they find themselves. In the long-term, this narrowed engagement with one's surrounding geographies accentuates the mismatch between person and environment and generates an amplifying feedback loop that

further deepens one into depression. In other words, geography is therapy. By redirecting one's focus of attention from one's inner conflicts to one's environment, one can attenuate the nefarious affective implications of lack of inner congruence and at the same time, achieve a better fit with one's environment, which, by itself, should contribute in the long-term to a person's well-being.

Having said these, I submit that geographers should learn to decompose human memory into its constituent parts because then and then alone will we become attuned to the full range of ways in which we *incorporate* places into our beings. When we consciously remember a given place, we usually recreate into our awareness a number of past episodes that carried a significant emotional weight for us. However, an awareness of the various subtypes of human memory will alert us to the fact that the mark a given place has had on us is much more extensive than the limited collection of emotional episodes we consciously recreate about that place. I have pointed out earlier in this Response the role of immunological memory, but the same kind of argument could and should be developed in future work for all subtypes of human memory. We certainly need more geographers and psychologists to join forces in this particularly promising research effort.

The second extension offered in the Comment pertains to the less obvious function of episodic memory. Hill usefully reviews recent work in psychology, which, although 'speculative and in need of further empirical support' (Hill 2011, p. 19), holds the promise of providing an answer to a puzzle that most of the readers of 'On time, place and happiness' have noticed: even though the ostensible function of episodic memory is to recall significant past events, recall is inaccurate in so many ways that one begins to wonder whether it should be seen as an asset or as a liability for effective human functioning. The answer to the puzzle is that the actual function of episodic memory is to help us plan our future actions by providing the necessary building blocks for the mental movies we create when envisioning the consequences of alternative courses of action. Seen through this lens, the apparent weaknesses of episodic memory become strengths. This at least is the impression one gets from reading Pascal Boyer's work. I have sympathy for this line of reasoning because one of my research interests concerns the problematic of wisdom (Simandan 2011c). At the heart of wisdom seems to lie an awareness and appreciation of two fundamental temporal patterns that explain why we deem some wise and many others foolish. One temporal pattern is 'it gets better before it gets worse'. It can be detected behind most human temptations (e.g. short-term pleasure from demeaning somebody, followed by long-term pain induced from lowered peer esteem and self-esteem) and figures prominently in the behavioural choices of impulsive individuals. The other temporal pattern is 'it gets worse before it gets better'. It can be noticed behind most adaptive behaviours (e.g. the short-term pain of studying hard, followed by the long-term gain of a better job, better status and better self-esteem) and governs the choices of those we deem wise, intelligent and conscientious. Boyer argued that involuntary episodic remembering helps us avoid impulsive choices and steers us towards wiser choices. My only comment on this idea is geographical, again: despite being endowed with episodic memory, most of us all too often still succumb to immediate temptation simply because the vividness of tempting stimuli in our surrounding geography (the proverbial cake on the plate) overpowers the rather pale, frail and distant recollections of the wise lessons we learned through past episodes. The path to better self-control, then, is geographical, again: clean your surrounding environment as much as you can of tempting stimuli and then you will not need to exercise much self-control in the first place. Yet, we live in a social world where many get rich from making sure that our surrounding geographies are never free of tempting stimuli.

Endnote

1 While reading this Response, I would encourage my readers to remember the two possible meanings of this deliberately ambiguous title: making (sense of place) through multiple memory systems (how we construct our sense of place as we dwell in a given place) and making sense (of place) through multiple memory systems (deepening our understanding of a key geographical concept).

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