Article

Influence of Environmental Perception on Place Attachment in Romanian Rural Areas

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Abstract: This study analyzes aspects of place attachment in rural areas, as an element of social stability that determines attitudinal and behavioral patterns within a harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment. A higher level of place attachment generates efficient behavior patterns for the improvement of the problems caused by pollution and the degradation of natural environments. In the second section, we set out to measure the forms of manifestation of place attachment in rural areas and to identify effective strategies that can contribute to increasing the intensity of this phenomenon. We set out a study of the causality between environmental perception and place attachment. We carried out an investigation based on a questionnaire to determine the forms of manifestation of place attachment and environmental perception. We tested a statistical model to confirm or not the determining relationship between the two social phenomena. Our study also offers an original interpretation of environmental perception and explains the degree of intensity with which this phenomenon is felt at the individual level. The practical importance of this study lies in the fact that it offers a strategy proven by sociological analysis, which can be applied to stimulate an increase in intensity of the manifestation of feelings of place attachment, which ultimately leads to the spread of pro-environmental attitudinal and behavioral patterns.

Keywords: pro-environment behavior; place attachment; rural communities; collective attitudes; social inclusion; behavioral education; ecosystems conservation

1. Introduction

In this study, we set out to investigate the relationship between place attachment and environmental perception in the Romanian countryside, taking into account visibility and concerns about the home and the environment defined from a plurality of perspectives, and also the historical development of interest in this topic. The literature review reveals, on the one hand, the abundance of types of relationships between the two phrases, and, on the other hand, the need to understand, establish, and formulate the meaning of the terms for the investigation of any type of relationship [1–23]. A brief history of the semantics of the terms and how they have been delimited and (re)signified becomes necessary. This can only be achieved philosophically, because all these terms existed and were explored in this field before the emergence of other fields such as sociology, psychology, urbanism, etc. [2–5,7,8,11,24–34]. In the second part of the study, we apply the research methodology to measure the intensity with which environmental perceptions are manifested at the level of the rural population [35,36]. The general premise is that people's interest in the environment is a necessary condition in the context of place attachment and pro-environmental behavior. The secondary premise is that there is a semantic impoverishment of how people relate to place and environment as the world becomes more technical and urbanized. However, this terminological technicality renames the same content with other names.

After the literature review, there follows an archeology of vocabulary (analysis, operationalization, and hermeneutics of terms) and we discuss the multiplicity of meanings.

The use of these methods stems from the problematization and history of terms that belong primarily to philosophy. Philosophy is the field that first formulated, delineated, and problematized these terms before the emergence of the social sciences and their interest in these issues. For the association between the first two terms, place and attachment, the interdependent relationship between place as home or community and self as self-identity is taken into account [1–5]. For the association between the environment and perception, the intentionality that shifts the focus from one term to another is taken into account [6].

The instrument used for the research methodology was a questionnaire model with closed questions that contained a set of Likert scales for measuring attachment to the residential environment and the degree of satisfaction related to the surrounding environment. This was applied to rural subjects. The variables used were landscapes of the home area, agriculture, the place of residence, one's own household, neighbors, and the street, and also relationships with the health system, public institutions, the village hall, school, relatives, and colleagues. The use of certain items in developing the place attachment measurement scale is based on the model by Scannell and Gifford, who proposed a three-dimensional framework of place attachment (personal, psychological, and place dimensions) after analyzing a diversity of studies [8].

The relevance of our study lies in an original interpretation of environmental perception and the relationship between it and place attachment and how we try to show and explain the level of intensity that each individual feels at the level of the phenomenon of environmental perception. Last but not least, the practical relevance of this study is that the influence of the elements that describe environmental perception must start from environmental elements with which people are in permanent contact, because these elements are more accessible and have the highest degree of repeatability in daily behavior, as proven by the methodology used. Therefore, the possibility of applying the strategy proposed in this study can open up further research that involves sharing models of pro-environmental attitudes and behavior.

2. Literature Review

The extent of development of place attachment in the past 40 years on the one hand, and, especially in the 1980s, definitions of place attachment related to relation with neighborhoods, affective aspects between people and the environment, and human behavior, on the other hand, have led to a diversity of definitions of place attachment [7]. Scannell and Gifford synthesized the multidimensionality of this term in which meanings are "synthesized into a three-dimensional, person–process–place organizing framework" given the semantic multiplicity of place attachment [8]. This tripartite model was often used in further studies because the three dimensions (personal, psychological, and place) cover the definition of place attachment. When considering the personal dimension of place attachment, it is necessary to consider the multitude of individual and collective meanings related to places. The connection between the person and sense of place, cognition, and behavior is focused on the psychological process [8,9]. The importance of this dimension derives from the inclusion of human beings and the way they relate to the place. The understanding of how individuals and the groups to which they belong relate to a place takes into account the importance of the nature of psychological interactions in environments that mean something important for people, such as "the psychological dimension includes the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of attachment" [8]. Therefore, place attachment cannot be defined apart from social interactions and the psychological components that occur at the level of these interactions. In this context, therefore, "spatial level, specificity, and the prominence of social or physical elements" are the characteristics of place attachment that provide place dimension, namely the social, symbolic, and physical aspects of place [9].

On the other hand, from investigation of the term "place attachment" derives concepts such as dwelling identity, community identity, and regional identity, in whose conceptual delimitations social or environmental factors are considered as demographic qualities of

residents and interpretive residential affiliations, social participation in the local community, and patterns of intercommunity spatial activity [1]. In the relationship between place and attachment, the way in which the person relates to the place and to the symbolism and affectivity of the place such as a house, home, residence, location, etc., matters. Therefore, the way in which "self is situated in the social-spatial environment" is important for place identity [1]. In this relationship between place and attachment, both the houses and the term of dwelling that opens towards the environment are important. The dwelling means both the way the person relates to their own house and the relationship between person and the exterior of the house, namely with the environment and nature. However, while there are numerous studies "that have attempted to assess the restorative properties of nature and/or urban green space", only a few of those studies have considered the inclusion of humans in the natural environment [10]. This horizontal spatial openness is problematic when people need to delineate a place in a natural environment, because they can only do so by limiting or delimiting a place. This delimitation takes into account visual boundaries ("a portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance" [11] (p. 2) that are in an interdependent relationship with "three-dimensional perception of the landscape and, therefore, visibility" [2]. The visibility of place depends on the eye that looks at the place and how the place becomes symbolized either by feelings or by pragmatic functions, etc. The place becomes visible (visible in a certain way) through the way people perceive it. Place perception opens towards attachment. The look discovers three spatial ranges (house, neighborhood, and city) which measure the social and physical levels of place attachment, taking into account the physical and social dimensions [12]. Dang and Weiss started from a diversity of meanings, perspectives, and indicators of place attachment and conducted research in which they quantified all studies investigating place attachment between 2010 and 2021; the studies are indexed in Web of Science and ProQuest. One of the authors' conclusions is that there are different results within the subdimensions used. They synthesized these subdimensions that measuring place attachment into dependence, place identity, place affect, and place bonding [7].

The indicators used and the referential field depend on the perspective approach from which term "place attachment" is viewed. The psychological perspective mainly uses the terminology of behavioral intention to explain "the development of place attachment with a particular behavioral intention". Most of the relevant psychological studies consider the relationship between place attachment and pro-environmental behavior intentions, also providing empirical evidence [7]. There is a sociological point of view according to which place becomes a location for social interactions or is valued as a symbol for a social group. Social relationships are included in attachment formation, and place attachment "is a significant positive predictor of social norms" [7,9]. The ways in which sociological indicators are classified, categorized, and used lead to the investigation of the diversity of relationships. For example, Fried conducted a study that shows that even though place attachment is a characteristic feature of life in many poor, ethnic, or immigrant communities, the development of sense of spatial identity for members of these communities is a critical component [9]. Therefore, the diversity of the reports and relationships between place and attachment or between place attachment and other indicators may be better understood depending on the definition of groups and communities as well as the indicators for measuring place attachment.

Place attachment has been considered from the point of view of how people relate to their own identity and to the identity of communities/societies, because people are attached to a certain place where they (re)find their own identity in an environment. When the environment is considered as landscape, landscape identity becomes possible because there is an interrelationship between people's own identity and the environment. Defining landscape identity is achieved through several activities such as landscape protection, management, and planning. Also, the definition is achieved by evaluation of landscape character from three aspects—the physical, the visual, and the image, and last but not least, through "the unique psycho-sociological perception of a place defined in a spatial-cultural

space" [2–4,14]. All of these can help with the conceptual delineations of this term, as there are issues with boundaries and how they can be determined [2]. Residential environment derives from landscape identity. One of Scannell and Gifford's hypotheses is that those who are place-attached have an identity relationship with the environment and those whose relationships are not based on an identity principle do not have an intense sense of place attachment. The two authors show that the principles that emerge from identity related to residential attachment are continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness [8]. Given the relationship between place attachment and the environment, it appears that place attachment "was primarily coined in the context of environmental psychology" [7], but we have already seen that this kind of relationship is more nuanced, at least in philosophy. On the other hand, in this relationship between place attachment and environment there is the concept of sense of place defined as "beliefs about the relationship between self and place" and "feelings toward the place; and the behavioral exclusivity of the place in relation to alternatives" [15].

From the point of view of human geography, the relationship with the natural environment predominates, in which the relationship between the person and the physical environment opens up to place attachment as a universal phenomenon [9]. Edward Relph, professor of geography at the University of Toronto, developed a measurement scale that relates the physical characteristics of place to the connection between people and social environment, on the one hand, and to subjective perceptions of place of origin, on the other hand [16]. The notion of environment is a general perspective of the physical spaces developed by geography. Scientists quickly understood that the environment has consistency only as an observed reality, so a dual perspective was formed in studies in this field. Thus, phenomena and concepts from the sciences of nature were combined with phenomena and notions from the social sciences [17,18]. The stake of research activities about the environment is rendered by human actions, including the way in which human activities have influenced nature. This stake is all the greater as it has revealed the emergence of global phenomena due to human activities which endanger the quality of the environment.

People's perceptions differ about the importance of aspects that explain the environment [19]. In their study conducted in Australia, Brown and Raymond divided the population into two, residents and visitors, and the authors obtained different results about environmental perception for the two groups. Therefore, the functionality of daily activities and individual perspectives on place are criteria for personal reporting relating to the environment. The quality of jobs and their numbers depend on the economic performance of an area [19].

The implications of the phenomena of place attachment and environmental perception go beyond issues of environmental quality. These phenomena significantly determine people's well-being and quality of life [20]. In 1963, a study was carried out that showed that even if residents had good or reasonable reasons to move to another place, when they had to move, they experienced major problems because they had strong place attachment. Persistence of regret or nostalgia exist long after people are relocated [21]. These emotional states have a strong influence on quality of life and feelings of well-being. Individuals' subjective perceptions of their own lifestyle will be disturbed, even if many other daily demands and needs are met, because there is a satisfaction related to the sense of place attachment. Rollero and Piccoli conducted a study based on a sample of 443 subjects. These subjects were first-year students and were chosen because they had changed their home and expressed feelings and emotional states generated by changes and uncertainties related to place attachment [22]. A significant correlation between place attachment and social well-being resulted, and the dimension was operationalized using a social well-being scale. This was composed of five items measuring five dimensions: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence [22,23]. Perception of well-being and quality of life are the mandatory attributes for ensuring an individual's emotional balance. These characteristics are highlighted by measuring the different types of relationships subjects have with the social networks and social institutions

they interact with every day. Therefore, desirable characteristics have a strong sociological component, as can be seen from the mentioned studies.

3. Methodology

The general premise of this study is that people's interest in the environment is a prerequisite in the context of place attachment. Hence the implicit premise that as the world becomes more technical and, implicitly, urbanized, there is a semantic impoverishment of the way human beings relate to home and place, and their perception of the environment is. However, this terminological technicalization only renames the same content by other names. Therefore, the section dedicated to philosophy becomes necessary to show, on the one hand, the pre-existence of the terms used by sociology, and on the other hand, that the variables used in this study are included in the semantic richness of philosophy.

Therefore, for the association between the first two terms, place and attachment, the interdependent relationship between place as home or community and self as self-identity is taken into account [1–5]. For the association between the environment and perception, the intentionality that shifts the focus from one term to another is taken into account [6].

In second part of this study, we apply the research methodology to measure the intensity with which environmental perceptions are manifested at the level of the rural population [35,36]. The use of certain items in developing the place attachment measurement scale is based on the model proposed by Scannell and Gifford. Those authors proposed a three-dimensional framework of place attachment (person, psychological, and place dimensions), after analyzing a diversity of studies [8]. The phenomenon of place attachment has an individual and a group dimension at the same time. The group perspective has a strong incidence on the personal level because people need social integration. Any form of adherence to social values and norms is a confirmation of social integration. People, consciously or not, tend to adhere to currents of opinion specific to the social environment they belong to, because social integration allows access to available forms of social support. Social support is a phenomenon that is strongly linked to quality of life.

The measurement scales for place attachment and environment perceptions were constructed according to the Likert model. In the case of place attachment we used 12 variables with scores from 1 to 10, and in the case of environment perception we used 10 variables measured with scales of four degrees of intensity. The development of the scales was based on the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), which is a measure of collective action developed from a meta-analysis of over 180 studies investigating predictors of collective actions [35].

The instrument used for the research methodology was a questionnaire model with closed questions that contained a set of Likert scales for measuring attachment to the residential environment and the degree of satisfaction related to the surrounding environment. This was applied to rural subjects. The survey operators administered 1576 questionnaires to as many subjects aged over 18, who were familiar with the reality of rural areas in north-western Romania. The variables used were landscape of the home area, agriculture, place of residence, one's own household, neighbors, the street, and also relationships with the health system, public institutions, the village hall, school, relatives, and colleagues.

4. Philosophical Meanings Used in Place Attachment Definitions

Dang and Weiss confirm that place attachment has been studied in a diversity of scientific disciplines such as environmental psychology, human geography, and sociology, but also in other research area as business and management, risk and crisis, urban planning, leisure, hospitality, and tourism. Terms such as community attachment, sense of community, place identity, place dependence, and sense of place are used in descriptions of place attachment. However, the authors observe that the meanings "are not easy to differentiate and the concepts partly overlap" [7]. Our observation is that all these meanings were already defined and had been used by philosophy since Greek antiquity. So, it is important to take a glance at the philosophical vocabulary to understand, on one hand, the conceptual

boundaries and clarification of meanings and, on the other hand, which meanings of place have been used by the other sciences. Last but not least, it is necessary to understand the transition that affected the technicalities of this vocabulary. Similar to the observation "common to all definitions is that place attachments refer to the relationship between individuals and their environment" [7], there is a philosophical presence because there is a vocabulary that describes and explains the relationships between people, place, and environment. If we take into account the etymologies and primary meanings of the ancient Greek terms including such verbs as oiken, naiein, and demein, and such nouns as domos or doma, ethos, hestia, horos, peras, etc. [24], five primary meanings of place attachment can be separated:

(a) The first meaning is that all the essential things of a human being's life are carried on under the order of the oikos and ensure the creation of memory as a durable link to the place where human life unfolded. The focus is on memory—a memory of affectivity—that opens towards the transcendent because the place of the human being (a place where the ancestors lived and where the descendants will live) is also a place of the gods. If it does not take into account the transcendent, the oikos meaning overlaps with that of place attachment [8].

(b) The second meaning derives from the first; there is a divine meaning of dwelling (the gods protect the house), and the link between human beings and gods is accomplished by ancestors and the dwelling of gods (naos—temple). Attachment is accomplished through a horizontal relationship of forming memory and identity as an individual, as family, and as community, and through a vertical relationship sacralizing of the place where we live. Inside of these appear environment and behavior. Human behavior is regulated by the relationship with gods, and the place—home and temple—means the environment as a world [24].

(c) The third meaning of place attachment states that the link with place is ensured through the imprint on the place by dwelling, because the primary meaning of ethos was the habits of the house. This could be a meaning of place identity [2–4,14].

(d) The fourth meaning of place attachment and environmental behavior has a unifying role, in which a central place is symbolized as center that finally attracts, gathers, and unifies the family and the household gods (Hestia, the protective goddess of the home).

(e) The fifth meaning of place attachment and environmental behavior implies that if we live within the border/limit (peras as limit crossing, horos as the visible territorial limit and hyper-oria as the territory located beyond the border), then we keep place attachment within that environment [24], but if we transgress this limit, the loss of the oikos, hestia, and naos occurs, that is, the loss of all previous meanings. If we go beyond the borders, we lose the attachment. In this case, environment influences place attachment. From these three meanings of limit, we can identify that the visible limit that we perceive with eye shows us the place as territory [2,11].

If for the Romans the meanings remain almost unchanged (each place has its own god—genius loci), in Christianity the primary sense of the naos (temple/the God's house) has been reconfigured. The church becomes a place outside the place where we live daily (house), but retains its centrality within the community. On the other hand, a major change is that the only real place becomes that of the divine presence, that is, the soul in a personal sense, especially in the first centuries of Christianity. Place matters only as a place where contemplation of the created world and of the creator is accomplished or possible. If geography is not symbolically invested, it loses its meaning [25]. On the other hand, the place of the church as place to find yourself, or to return to yourself, or to leave yourself in the care of God, etc., is the axis mundi of any rural community (and up to a point, urban communities as well). Practically, Greco–Roman and Christian semantic diversity is found in almost all areas until modernity. In a certain sense, Heidegger can be considered both the last thinker who named, thought about, and formulated the problem of the meaning of place through a relationship with the semantics of the ancient Greek language, as well as

the first opener of new ways of thinking about place and dwelling, not only in philosophy but also in other fields. For Heidegger, there are boundaries that separate the dwelling place from the rest of the space and that have impregnated/permeated the interiority qualitatively, both horizontally and vertically [5].

Perhaps it is precisely here that an ontological mutation (the limitation that delimits the domestic space and the limitation that delimits the public space) takes place that will later be taken over by sociologists. However, perception has a central place in the careful description of lived experience. We can change the elements of our visual field so that stable things appear [6]. From this moment, technicality of terms emerges depending on the autonomy of the diversity of fields and the perspective that each field has on the terms.

The Heideggerian phenomenological approach is re-signified by Schultz, who explains how space is converted into place. Place has only the meaning of house/public building, which is understood through the relationship between context (putting the place in a context) and dwelling. Schultz aims to slide towards utility and efficiency and explains the transition from space to house referring to aspects such as infrastructure, facilities, etc. [26]. Thus, Schultz's theory only applies to the urban. However, for Harvey, the home is that place where we live accidentally/by chance (a building that protects us from bad weather) and is a private space that ensures privacy and a retreat from the intrusive gaze of others. The habitation is related to location because there is an importance of emplacement, infrastructure, etc. that reflects the social status of the inhabitants [27].

The indicators that measure wellness and the quality of individual life appear once the habitation begins to be defined and problematized according to several criteria such as emplacement, thermal efficiency, pollution level, public institutions in the vicinity of house, etc. The ontological mutation was achieved when the standard of living and individual prosperity was measured/quantified by means of indicators that apply to the way the inhabitants live and not to the way the human beings themselves live. New terms such as housing quality index appeared. For example, Ranci consider quality of living to be a key element of quality of life, and for Trudel quality of living is the basic dimension of quality of life [28] (p. 46). The importance of a classification in relation to the indicators used as statistical variables eliminated human beings and gods from the topic of place. The house can become home only after a period that is long enough to ensure the emergence of the sense of belonging, the sense of identity that is the place attachment [29]. On the other hand, other terms appear, such as sustainable development, which in 1991 became the main concept in the U.N.O. document entitled Caring for the Earth in 1991. Since 1992, the Sustainable Development Commission of Rio de Janeiro has analyzed, informed, and set strategy. Authors such as Backer, who introduced the term behavior setting (any behavior is formed according to the spatial setting in which it manifests) [30], and participants at the Stockholm Conference in 1970 prepared the ground for the debates that take place today. On the other hand, Braud observes that the environmental problem that has been regulated by the whole community becomes a political problem when those who hold the power take over the regulations and the criteria of these regulations [31] (p. 11). So, in this relationship between place attachment and environmental behavior, new indicators established by experts in fields such as ecology, sociology, urbanism, etc., are added.

In premodernity, both the village (rural) and the city (urban) used the same vocabulary to define the boundaries of place or the world as intramuros or extramuros. Vernant shows that the way the ancient Greeks conceived nature/world and religion influenced the way people organized both the interior space of the house and the exterior space, the space of the polis. The ancient Greeks introduced the term agora as a public space (debating), public square, and city center [32]. The symbolism of the center (axis mundi) as a common place that connects and unifies exists from antiquity until today, especially in countryside. The agora, the church, and the public square become places where the whole community meets, communicates, and participates together, in communion with God. Rural residents have a sense of belonging to the place. This place is delimited as the center (the hearth of the village), as a horizontal limit (boundary/frontier), and by a verticality mediated by the

church. All these give people a sense of belonging to the world as a whole (God's world). The preservation of one's own identity can only be achieved in the place where people are themselves (home) and to which they belong (home, village, community, church, world).

In the countryside, limits are very important, in the sense of the old terms horos, hyper-oria, and peras. Preserving one's own identity can only be achieved in the place where one is oneself (the house with all the elements such as family, environment, etc.) and to which one belongs (the village, the community, the church with all the elements such as neighbors, agriculture, landscape, relationships with others and institutions, etc.). With the migration of the peasant to the city, some of these meanings are lost. Oiko-nomia (economics) became the simple accounting of household goods before becoming the science of today [24]. Basically, the essential meanings of the terms nostos and oikos have been lost.

Are these meanings still preserved in the countryside? Stahl shows that there is a wide variety of worldviews from village to village and from person to person. There is a diversity of elements as a result of previous generations, and the humanization of the landscape where people are born is a tradition, namely, a part of contemporary history is kept alive. Fields such as demography, sociology, anthropology, history of mentalities, etc., show us a past that lives in current forms [33] (pp. 118, 257–258), namely, the classifications and categories that the social sciences use and which have gradually changed from the discovery of the peasant's point of view as different from that of the city dweller [34] to the current re-signification of the peasant as a human being who lives harmoniously in the environment and respects nature. We aim to discover which of the meanings that place attachment once had still exist today in the rural environment and what is the influence of environmental perception.

5. Materials and Methods

The research instrument used for this study was a closed-question questionnaire design, which included a set of Likert scales to measure attachment to the residential environment and satisfaction with the environment. The questionnaire was administered to rural subjects and are constructed in accordance with the perceptual sensitivities and everyday concerns theoretically attributed to residents of the target area. The survey operators administered 1576 questionnaires to as many subjects aged over 18, who were familiar with the reality of rural areas in north-western Romania. The selection of respondents involved multi-stage sampling, the study being based on three stages. In the first stage, a random sample of localities was taken. The second stage involved applying the random step method in the field for the selection of households, and in the last stage, the selection of subjects who responded to the questionnaires, according to age and gender category. The sampling error was approximated to +/−2.7% with a probability of 95%.

The measurement scales for place attachment and environmental perceptions were constructed according to the Likert model. In the case of place attachment we used 12 variables with scores from 1 to 10, and in the case of environmental perception we used 10 variables measured with scales of 4 degrees of intensity. The development of the scales was based on the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), which is a measure of collective action developed from a meta-analysis of over 180 studies investigating predictors of collective actions [35]. This methodological model is based on three key variables: emotional reactions to injustice, efficacy, and identification. Studies show that emotional appraisals can heighten people's willingness to engage in collective action [36]. In this respect, it should be noted that the model for interpreting forms of place attachment in rural areas has the ultimate aim of determining pro-environmental behavior, which is materialized in everyday life as a form of manifestation of collective action. Place attachment is a multidimensional concept with person, psychological process, and place dimensions [8]. This study focuses on aspects related to place dimensions. Of the three dimensions, this is the most accessible in terms of the possibility of intervention and influence, with the objective of generating pro-environmental behaviors. Place attachment is a phenomenon strongly correlated with feelings of well-being and, therefore, the measurement scale we used in

our study took into account the social well-being scale [37]. Thus, the variables describing the intensity of place attachment can be grouped into three categories: city attachment, neighborhood attachment, and attachment to public institutions.

We attempted to identify environmental perceptions as predictors of place attachment through a model that combines the variables considered in the literature. We based our hypotheses on the results of previous studies: Hypothesis 1: Subjects with a higher intensity of environmental perception propose a more positive image of the place where they live, because place attachment represents the emotional connection to a physical area [38]. Hypothesis 2: Representations of the environment are based on social experiences and acquire different values, and they are also a deep expression of the person's subjectivity [39]. Hypothesis 3: There is a causal relationship between environmental perception and place attachment that manifests itself as a directly proportional relationship.

6. Results

Based on factor analysis, we aimed to reduce the 12 variables used to describe the phenomenon of place attachment. We generated a factor characterized by a common variance (at the level of the 12 initial factors) of 44.7% of the sample, which represents approximately 700 respondents (Figure 1).

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Component Matrix [a]	1
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %		
1	5.374	44.780	44.780	The landscape of the home area	0.776
2	1.538	12.817	57.597	Agricultural landscape	0.751
3	0.952	7.937	65.534	The landscape of the place of residence	0.735
4	0.737	6.139	71.673	Relationship with the health system	0.709
5	0.687	5.723	77.396	The landscape of your own household	0.670
6	0.561	4.673	82.068	Neighborhood landscape, street landscape	0.664
7	0.462	3.853	85.921	Relationship with the school	0.663
8	0.423	3.521	89.443	Relations with relatives	0.652
9	0.378	3.146	92.589	Relations with colleagues	0.619
10	0.359	2.991	95.580	Relations with other public institutions	0.607
11	0.295	2.461	98.041	Relationships with friends	0.597
12	0.235	1.959	100.000	Relationship with the town hall	0.548
Extraction method: principal component analysis.				Extraction method: principal component analysis.	
				[a]. 1 component extracted.	

Figure 1. Total variance explained.

The questions referred to the quality perceived by the subjects regarding the different aspects that characterize place attachment. The minimum score is 1 and represents the greatest distance from the ideal situation, and 10 is the maximum value and represents the ideal situation that the subject perceives in relation to the different characteristics by which we defined place attachment.

Table 1 highlights the scores resulting from respondents' ratings of the characteristics that define place attachment. We also set out to measure the intensity of environmental perceptions in the rural population, based on the idea that people's interest in the environment is a prerequisite in the context of place attachment and pro-environmental behavior. Indeed, it can be expected that there are people who do not show sufficient interest in environmental issues, who do not understand, do not appreciate, and do not emphasize the characteristics of the environment as an important part in determining the quality of daily existence. This category may develop a place attachment based mainly on the phenomenon of socialization, but it will be difficult to manifest pro-environmental attitudes and behavior if their relationship with the environment is characterized by indifference rather than active involvement. Environmental perceptions are therefore the foundation of pro-environmental behavior, and we aim to describe how this phenomenon manifests itself

in rural areas. On the other hand, we think that it is significant to construct an explanatory scheme about the influence of environmental perceptions on place attachment, since these two phenomena are mutually conditional.

Table 1. Place attachment variables.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Relations with colleagues	1550	1	10	8.74
Relationships with friends	1551	1	10	8.68
The landscape of your own household	1555	1	10	8.39
The relationship with the town hall	1473	1	10	7.81
Agricultural landscape	1546	1	10	7.74
The landscape of the home area	1547	1	10	7.42
Relations with relatives	1551	1	10	7.35
Neighborhood landscape, street landscape	1551	1	10	7.09
Relationship with the health system	1551	1	10	7.04
Relationship with the school	1549	1	10	6.97
Relations with other public institutions	1477	1	10	6.93
Relationship with other aspects of daily life	1531	1	10	6.81
The landscape of the place of residence	1555	1	10	6.75

Using factor analysis again, the 10 variables measuring environmental perception were synthesized into three factors (Table 2). Here we can see that the variables clustered around the third factor represent close everyday visual and interactional aspects with an almost permanent and constant presence in everyday experiences. The first factor refers to environmental elements with which the individual interacts frequently. The second factor is made up of variables that characterize things that the individual interacts with rarely that are contextually more removed from everyday experience, and the third factor is made up of environmental elements with which man is in permanent contact. We can therefore say that environmental perception is a social phenomenon described by three factors that describe the frequency of the individual's interaction with environmental elements: factor 1—contextual level of interaction with environmental elements; factor 2—everyday level of interaction; and factor 3—permanent level of contact with environmental elements.

Table 2. Environmental perception component.

Rotated Component Matrix [a]	Component		
	1	2	3
things from the house	0.220	0.216	0.665
the yard of the household	0.592	0.072	0.525
the street you live on	0.108	0.331	0.712
own garden	0.006	0.475	0.655
the center of the village	0.641	0.055	0.302
hay or pasture	0.759	0.333	0.044
stables and places for animals	0.843	0.204	0.011
meadow/hill/mountain/lake/river/swamp/forest	0.278	0.697	0.050
shop/factory/wind farm/hydroelectric dam	0.035	0.696	0.173
exploitation of raw materials	0.164	0.757	0.036

Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. [a] Rotation converged in eight iterations.

Furthermore, in Table 2, through factor analysis, we show that the variables measuring environmental perception are grouped into three categories according to the significance of how they correlate with each other. The first category consists of four variables: things from the house; the yard of the household; the street you live on; the center of the village. The second factor consists of the variables: own garden; hay or pasture; stables and places for animals. The third factor contains the variables meadow/hill/mountain/lake/river/swamp/forest, shop/factory/wind farm/hydroelectric dam, and exploitation of raw materials. Analyzing this situation, we found that the homogenizing element of the factors is the intensity of interaction of the subjects with the elements of the environment. Thus, if we look at the composition of factor 3 (Table 3), it includes the variables things from the house, the yard of the household, the street you live on, and the center of the village, which refer to elements of the environment with a high level of accessibility. Subjects come into contact with these elements very frequently. The conclusion is that spatial proximity, which determines the frequency of interactions between humans and environmental elements, is the main homogenizing element of environmental perception. The three factors that capture and measure environmental perception are named accordingly: environmental elements with permanent contact, environmental elements with daily contact, and environmental elements with occasional contact.

Table 3. Model summary regression of influence of environmental perception on place attachment.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.775 [a]	0.600	0.596	1.15516
2	0.841 [b]	0.708	0.702	0.99215
3	0.878 [c]	0.771	0.764	0.88346

[a] Predictors: (constant), environmental elements with permanent contact. [b] Predictors: (constant), environmental elements with permanent contact, environmental elements with daily contact. [c] Predictors: (constant), environmental elements with permanent contact, environmental elements with daily contact, environmental elements with occasional contact.

Figure 2 shows the intensity with which the environment is perceived from the perspective of the three factors that explain this phenomenon. We can see that the intensity of perception of environmental elements is directly proportional to the frequency of interactions; in other words, the more interactions there are, the greater is the intensity of environmental perception. The elements of environmental perception most intensely manifested are those with permanent contact. In total, 44% of subjects stated that the things from the house, the yard of the household, the street they live on, and their own garden are the elements of environment that they notice to a very high degree. Only 24% of the population gave very much notice to the aspects meadow/hill/mountain/lake/river/swamp/forest, shop/factory/wind farm/hydroelectric dam, or exploitation of raw materials.

The coefficient of determination (R square) in Table 3 shows that each of the three regression models causes significant variation in the place attachment phenomenon. Environmental perception elements with permanent contact cause variation in place attachment in 60% of the study population. Elements with permanent contact together with elements with everyday contact cause a variation in place attachment in 70.8% of the population. Finally, if we add the occasional interaction elements and obtain the total of environmental perception, there is significant variation in place attachment in 77.1% of the study population.

Table 4 allows us to analyze the regression equations and make predictions about the evolution of feelings of place attachment. If we disregard the significance level of the multiple regression models, all three models have a significance level less than 0.1, which means that they have a strongly significant linear regression. Model 3 is the complete model, which includes all elements of environment perception. We therefore choose to discuss the prediction that this model allows. The regression equation is: place attachment = 2.743 + 0.457 (environmental elements with occasional contact) + 0.527 (environmental elements with daily contact) + 0.733 (environmental elements with permanent contact). Place attachment

emotion changes by one unit when environmental perception changes by 1.717 units. In other words, any increase or decrease in environmental perception by 1.717 units will result in an increase (decrease) in place attachment by 1 unit. If we look at the three elements of environmental perception, we can see that each element increases the effect on the phenomenon of place attachment. Each element has a directly proportional influence on place attachment. The influence can be estimated for each of the three models of environmental perception. The prediction of the influence of the elements of environment perception on place attachment must start from the environmental elements with permanent contact, because these elements are the most accessible, with the highest degree of repeatability in everyday behavior.
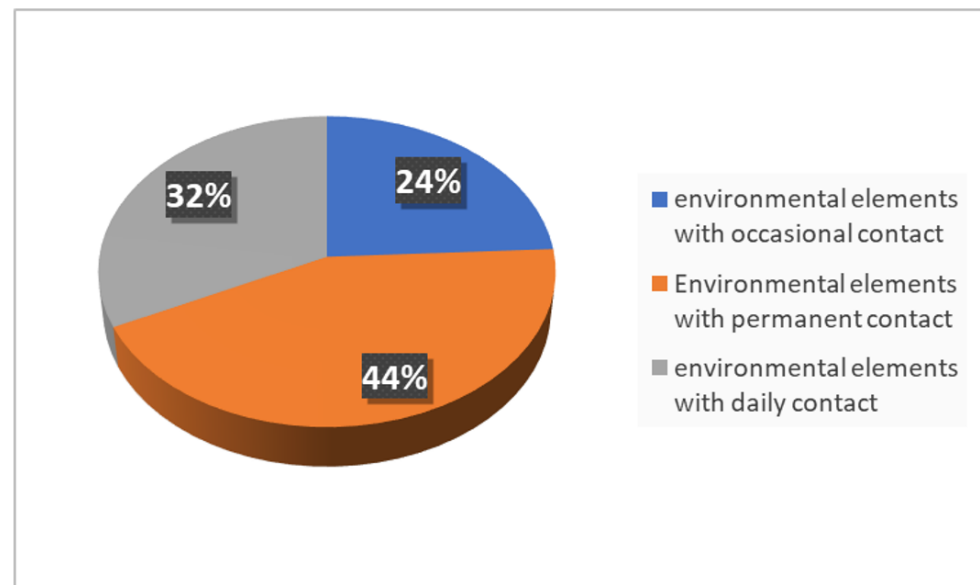

Figure 2. Elements of environmental perception.

Table 4. Coefficients table of the influence of environmental perception on place attachment.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	*t*	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.192	0.288		14.555	0.000
	Environmental elements with permanent contact	1.224	0.100	0.775	12.252	0.000
2	(Constant)	3.457	0.276		12.541	0.000
	Environmental elements with occasional contact	0.673	0.125	0.426	5.370	0.000
	Environmental elements with daily contact	0.812	0.134	0.479	6.047	0.000
3	(Constant)	20.743	0.281		9.745	0.000
	Environmental elements with occasional contact	0.457	0.119	0.289	3.836	0.000
	Environmental elements with daily contact	0.527	0.132	0.311	3.997	0.000
	Environmental elements with occasional contact	0.733	0.141	0.379	5.182	0.000

Dependent variable: Q6PA (place attachment).

7. Discussion

First, we propose some more precise details about the role of philosophical analysis in the design of this study. First of all, we would like to point out that philosophical analysis is a methodological approach that derives from the field of knowledge developed by various authors under the name of "philosophy of social science" [40–42]. Specifying the philosophy of social science to our research subject, we highlight some ideas:

1. Philosophical analysis covers important issues that could not be described by statistical analysis. One such situation is that place attachment analysis raises an ontological dispute in that this phenomenon exists outside the symbolic or cultural meanings that actors manifest. In simple terms, people are usually not aware of feelings like place attachment or environmental perception, they do not think about them, and they do not use them in conversations. Yet, they exist and their consequences are decisive for behavioral patterns such as those based on pro-environmental attitudes.

2. Sociological research covers a limited fraction of a very large phenomenon in terms of its social implications. Philosophical analysis supports sociological analysis. Thus, the etymological perspective offers knowledge at the historical level; philosophical analysis brings into question the role of church and faith in crystallizing place attachment; Heideggerian phenomenology emphasizes the emergence of meaning, as space is becoming place and house is becoming home; last but not least, philosophical analysis argues the authors' choice to limit this sociological study to rural communities.

3. From a methodological point of view, philosophical analysis contributed to the creation of the theoretical entities that we have used in the research. Philosophy of social sciences introduces an empiricist approach to social reality that promotes the construction of theoretical entities by means of "useful fictions" that subsequently allow scientific prediction by virtue of mathematical content. This type of approach is called "instrumentalism" [43], and is precisely what has happened in this study by relating philosophical analysis to sociological interpretation. Theoretical entities were defined by the items on the scales and then placed in relation as independent variables that determine place attachment as a dependent variable.

Given that "a concept has a specific defining attributes because of its role in the theory", a brief foray into the field of philosophy became necessary because in the methodological literature, these philosophical questions are often called problems of "construct validity". The main concept that we used in this study had many attributes and meanings, but all of them are kept under other names in sociology. Last but not least, "real features of the world correspond to the theoretical concepts or constructs, and valid surveys (or other tests) can measure them" [44].

The phenomenon of place attachment has an individual and a group dimension at the same time. The group perspective has a strong incidence on the personal level because people need social integration. Any form of adherence to social values and norms is a confirmation of social integration. People, consciously or not, tend to adhere to currents of opinion specific to the social environment they belong to, because social integration allows access to available forms of social support. Social support is a phenomenon that is strongly linked to quality of life [45]. The quality of personal life is, most often, one of the powerful factors that give meaning to human life, even if a kind of mercantilism is observed. This is suggested by the meanings that rural people give to the term environment. Most of them consider that the environment is "place around us", which is a general perspective with a high degree of impartiality and can be seen as representative of the relationship between population and nature in the targeted social area [46].

If we calculate the answers given for all 12 variables in relation to place attachment, we obtain the percentage results presented in Table 5, which highlight the intensity with which the phenomenon of place attachment is manifested among the inhabitants of rural areas in the north-western part of Romania. The total number of respondents differs and is smaller than the number of subjects who answered each variable separately, because in the case of the data in Table 5, only subjects who answered all questions related to place attachment at the same time were considered.

It is important to note that 10% of the population manifest a lack of a sense of place attachment, while 26.1% of the population manifest characteristics that suggest a strong attachment to the area in which they live. People in rural areas are more likely to be attached to the area where they live, and this characteristic is a very good context for promoting pro-environmental behavior. However, there is a need to raise awareness of environmental

needs, and then the chances are good that the majority of the population will make efforts to conserve the environment. At the same time, other social forces and phenomena will also have an impact on this behavioral pattern. As a rule, when it comes to collective issues that are part of a social environment's agenda of priorities, the influence of the majority's views is also taken up by those who have different perspectives or are indifferent. Adherence to majority opinion is a strategy of social integration and is often mandatory, especially for issues that are intensely perceived by the public. Pollution issues have been and are intensely debated in the public arena. In addition to public analyses, marketing arguments such as the pollution standard for cars or green certificates have also emerged. So, failure to meet standardized pollution reduction performance can lead to additional costs. In this context, environmental cleanliness issues are willingly or unwillingly becoming part of people's daily concerns.

Table 5. Place attachment results.

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
soft place attachment	125	10.0	10.0
medium place attachment	803	63.9	73.9
strong place attachment	328	26.1	100.0
Total	1256	100.0	

Even if the focus of this research is ultimately on pro-environmental behavior, we believe that this topic needs to be investigated from related perspectives, primarily because of the notoriety of pollution problems and their consequences. This notoriety generates an intense phenomenon of social desirability among the population, especially since the positions towards environmental problems, which we find almost permanently in the public space, are unidirectional and cannot be otherwise since the problems generated by pollution cannot be seen in a positive sense. In this context, investigations into the phenomenon of place attachment have a double functional role. Firstly, place attachment is a barometer for the individual's willingness to manifest pro-environmental behavioral patterns and, secondly, it has the role of avoiding systematic errors generated by the phenomenon of social desirability.

Of the variables describing environmental perception (Figure 3), we note that three were listed by 80% of respondents. These are the things from the house, the yard of the household, and one's own garden. It can be said that these three variables describe the closest areas of the environment, which appear most frequently in the action areas of the respondents. Environmental perception is a social manifestation that can be found in four distinct forms: the environment as external object, as representation of self, as embodiment of value, and as arena for action [47]. The three aspects of the environment perceived with high intensity by the subjects, can be classified simultaneously in two categories: as representation of self and as arena for action. The frequency with which the individual interacts with the environmental element does not necessarily represent an advantage in relation to increased intensity of perception. On the contrary, frequent interaction inhibits attention and induces a sense of habituation that generates a tendency to carelessness and a perception of the natural as ordinary and banal. The literature shows that increased attention to environmental elements with which the individual interacts all the time is an indicator of social isolation [48]. It is not the same when we think of environmental elements as forms of representation of the self or as environmental tools in carrying out one's own activities. The conclusion is that the increased intensity we see in the manifestation of environmental perception has deeply subjective explanations. More concretely, environmental perception manifests itself in the context of elements that can be used as a representation of the self but also as a pragmatic form of providing a suitable environment for the performance of everyday activities. This is not unimportant, because

such information can decisively guide strategies to increase the intensity with which environmental perceptions are manifested in order to induce pro-environmental behavior.
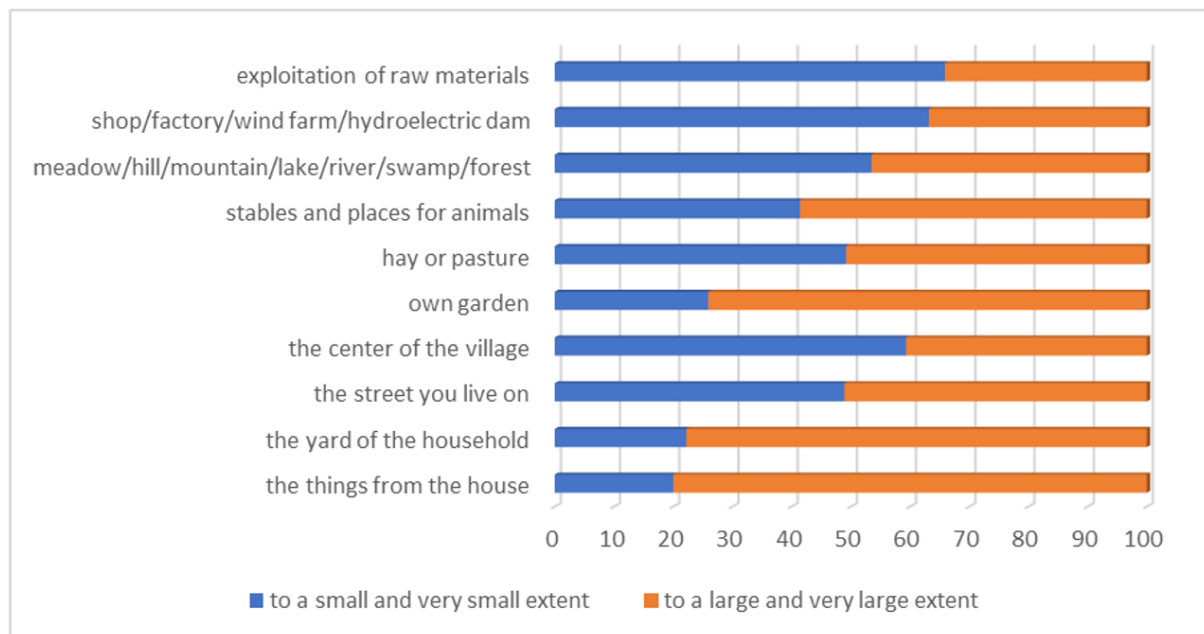

Figure 3. Intensity of occurrence of variables defining environmental perception.

8. Conclusions

Therefore, we consider that, in the rural environment, the meanings of the primary philosophical terms have been preserved in sociology, even if they have other names. All these meanings are maintained within the variables that we used in the research section.

Analyzing and understanding the forms of manifestation of the phenomenon of place attachment is an important issue for contemporary societies. The need to monitor and stimulate the growth of place attachment is stronger today than in the past. This is due to the problems faced by mankind in relation to the environment and pollution. Inadequate care of areas occupied and frequented by humans also results in pollution of nature, and this leads to major imbalances in ecosystems, affecting or destroying flora and fauna and generating extreme climatic phenomena associated with global warming. From a social point of view, all this inevitably leads to a lower quality of life in general.

The effectiveness of knowing the forms of manifestation of place attachment and subsequently developing productive strategies to stimulate its spread and intensity is based on identifying elements of everyday life that facilitate intervention in this phenomenon. Our study is oriented towards environmental perception as a general form that facilitates the interaction between man and the world around him. Also, environmental perception is an area of everyday perception that plays an important role in well-being and in the adoption of positive attitudinal patterns towards people, towards institutional environments, and towards everyday activities.

As stated in the literature review, there are differences between rural and urban environments in terms of the relationship between people and the environment. The pace of life, social symbols, and even the attitudinal patterns that people adopt in relation to the world are things that occur differently in rural environments compared with the urban space [49]. First of all, referring to urban environments, the rules of interaction with elements of the environment are stricter. This is largely due to the fact that elements of the urban environment are often the result of public investment. Quality assessment in public investments has sustainability as an indicator of performance, so public institutions impose behavioral patterns that generate sustainability. On the other hand, in terms of surface area of environmental zones, rural inhabitants influence and interact with larger

areas. These areas are characterized as natural environmental zones. The measurement of the forms of manifestation of place attachment in rural social environments is based on this consideration of areas of interaction and influence on the part of the inhabitants.

Environmental perception is a basic form of interaction between man and nature, a way in which individuals define themselves in relation to the world around them. The hypothesis that environmental perceptions exert a determining force in relation to place attachment has been confirmed. The ten variables through which we described environment perception were structured into three categories according to the ways in which they correlate with each other. The factor analysis resulted in three categories describing environmental perception: environmental elements with permanent contact, environmental elements with daily contact, and environmental elements with occasional contact.

There is a deterministic relationship between environmental perception and place attachment, a relationship that was tested by regression analysis. According to the results of this study, it is possible to accurately predict the intensity of increase or decrease in the feeling of place attachment as a function of the measured variation in the intensity of environmental perception. For example, if we consider the category of the population that shows a low level of place attachment, we will be able to increase this level through concrete interventions in environmental perception. So, if the intensity of environment perception increases by 1.7 units (which concretely means an increased interest in the environment), according to the regression analysis we will obtain an increase in the intensity of place attachment by one unit. Based on these analyses, we are able to provide a strategy to improve pro-environmental behavior through feelings of place attachment, which is modified by directly intervening in the interest that people living in rural environments show for the elements of the environment they interact with in everyday life.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.D., D.M. and I.M.O.; methodology, D.D.; software, D.D.; validation, D.D., D.M. and I.M.O.; formal analysis, D.D. and D.M.; investigation, D.D., D.M. and I.M.O.; resources, D.D., D.M. and I.M.O.; writing—original draft preparation, D.D. and D.M.; writing—review and editing, D.D., D.M. and I.M.O.; visualization, D.M. and I.M.O.; project administration, D.D., D.M. and I.M.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study did not require ethical approval.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to privacy considerations.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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