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A Study of the Conceptual Framework of Environmental Psychology

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Abstract: *This research paper looks to the past, present, and future of environmental psychology. The paper begins with a discussion of the importance of the socio-environmental context for human behaviour. Having demonstrated that the environment, far from being a silent witness to human actions, is an integral part of the plot, the paper continues with an examination of the nature and scope of environmental psychology. Both its interdisciplinary origins and its applied emphasis have conspired to prevent a straightforward and uncontentious definition of environmental psychology.*

Keywords: *environmental psychology, socio-environmental, sustainable development, global environment.*

Content:

We review some of these and suggest how recent definitions are beginning to adopt a more inclusive, holistic, and transactional perspective on people-environment relations. The next section discusses the various spatial scales at which environmental psychologists operate—from the micro level such as personal space and individual rooms, public/ private spaces, and public spaces to the macro level of the global environment. This incorporates research on the home, the workplace, the visual impact of buildings, the negative effects of cities, the restorative role of nature, and environmental attitudes and sustainable behaviours. The third section takes three key theoretical perspectives that have informed environmental psychology—determinism, interactionism, and transactionalism—and uses these as an organizing framework to examine various theories used by environmental psychologists: arousal theory, environmental load, and adaptation level theory within a behaviourist and determinist paradigm; control, stress adaptation, behavioural elasticity, cognitive mapping, and environmental evaluation within an interactionist paradigm; and behaviour settings, affordance theory and theories of place, place identity, and place attachment within transactionalism.

Because of the difficulties of defining environmental psychology, many writers have sought instead to characterize or describe it, as we ourselves did in part earlier. The most recent of these can be found in the fifth edition of Bell, Greene, Fisher, and Baum's (2001) textbook *Environmental Psychology*. They suggested that (a) environmental psychology studies environment-behaviour relationships as a unit, rather than separating them into distinct and self-contained elements; (b) environment-behaviour relationships are really interrelationships; (c) there is unlikely to be a sharp distinction between applied and basic research; (d) it is part of an international and interdisciplinary field of study; and (e) it employs an eclectic range of methodologies. But description is not a substitute for definition. Leaving aside Proshansky et al.'s (1970, p. 5) oft-quoted "environmental psychology is what environmental psychologists do," the same authors suggested that "in the long run, the only really satisfactory way . . . is in terms of theory. And the simple fact is that as yet there is no adequate theory, or even the beginnings of a theory, of environmental psychology on which such a definition might be based" (p. 5). By 1978, Bell, Fisher, and Loomis, in the first edition of *Environmental Psychology*, cautiously suggested that it is "the study of the interrelationship between behaviour and the built and natural environment," although they preferred to opt for the initial Proshansky et al.

conclusion. Other, not dissimilar, definitions followed: “an area of psychology whose focus of investigation is the interrelationship between the physical environment and human behaviour and experience” (Holahan, 1982, p. 3); “is concerned with the interactions and relationships between people and their environment” (Proshansky, 1990); “the discipline that is concerned with the interactions and relationships between people and their environments” (McAndrew, 1993, p. 2)

Domains of Environmental Psychology:

Environmental psychology deals with the relationship between individuals and their life spaces. That includes not only the environment to provide us with all what we need to survive but also the spaces in which to appreciate, understand, and act to fulfil higher needs and aspirations.

The individual’s cognitions and behaviours gain meaning in relation to the environment in which these cognitions or behaviours are developed. Consequently, environmental psychologists are confronted with the same issues that concern all psychologists. The basic domains of environmental psychology include (a) environmental perceptions and cognitions, (b) environmental values, attitudes, and assessment, and (c) behavioural issues. It studies these processes in relation to the environmental settings and situations in which they occur. For instance, environmental perceptions are not typically studied with the aim of identifying general laws concerning different aspects of the perceived object. Environmental perception deals with built or natural landscape perception with an emphasis on sites treated as entities (Ittelson, 1973); the perceiver is considered part of the scene and projects onto it his or her aspirations and goals, which will have an aesthetic dimension as well as a utilitarian function. The question the perceiver asks in appraising a landscape is not just “Do I like the appearance of this landscape?” but also “What can this landscape do for me (i.e., what function does it serve)?” (Lee, 2001). Likewise, interpersonal behaviour within an environmental psychology context is studied in order that we might better understand how environmental settings influence these relationships (e.g., urban constraints on the frequency of relational behaviour with friends or relatives; Moser, 1992).

Because of its very focus, environmental psychology has been and remains above all a psychology of space to the extent that it analyzes individuals’ and communities’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours in explicit relation to the physical and social contexts within which people and communities exist. Notions of space and place occupy a central position. The discipline operates, then, at several levels of spatial reference, enabling the investigation of people-environment interactions (at the individual, group, or societal level) at each level. Reference to the spatial dimension makes it possible to take into account different levels of analysis:

Privatespaces (individual level): personal and private space, dwelling, housing, workplace, office

Public/private environments (neighbourhood-community level): semi-public spaces, blocks of flats, the neighbourhood, parks, green spaces.

Public environments (individual-community level, inhabitants): involving both built spaces (villages, towns, cities) as well as the natural environment (the countryside, landscape, etc.)

The global environment (societal level): the environment in its totality, both the built and the natural environment, natural resources. Environmental psychology analyzes and characterizes people-environment interactions and/or transactions at these different environmental levels. These relations can best be understood through perception, needs, opportunities, and means of control.

Needs and Rights in Environmental Psychology:

The emphasis of much environmental psychology has been on identifying and then assisting in the process of providing for and satisfying people’s needs. It is assumed within the philosophy of Brandt and Bruntland that environmental needs should be defined by those in power (i.e., the West), not by the people whose needs are supposedly being satisfied. This form of donor

benevolence as a strategy for tackling environmental deficits operates at the local, national, and international level. Thus, it is argued, we need to prevent pollution and conserve the rainforests, wildlife, energy, and water supplies. The West finds it difficult to understand why those experiencing environmental degradation—but also suffering poverty, malnutrition, poor housing, unemployment, and high mortality rates—have different priorities. The needs-based approach is often carried through to be an assumption that guides environmental psychology research.

An alternative approach focuses on environmental rights in which those without power define their needs themselves and try to secure the rightful access to resources to satisfy those needs. There is a difficulty with trying to integrate a bottom-up rights approach with a top-down needs-driven approach because one is faced with the problem of who sets the agenda. Groups will have difficulties asserting their rights when the allocation processes and agendas are structured by others. A rights approach does not mean that neither help nor resources are required or given. Clearly it is essential that the haves of the world continue to provide for the have nots—but within a context of participation, self-determination, transparency in decision-making, and accountability by all concerned. The essential factor is that the starting point for discussing the allocation of resources is different.

Long-term change and development will come about only through informed community action, rather than a dependency relationship on experts and technological-fix solutions. The development of environmental consciousness and capacities without the simultaneous development of opportunities for action leads to a feeling of powerlessness (Uzzell, 1999). For this reason cooperation between all agencies and institutions is necessary in order to secure action opportunities. Psychologists in general and environmental psychologists in particular have the expertise and experience to play an important role in this process. It is here that we can see the value of research in suggesting prescriptive roles and functions for an environmental psychology that should be taken seriously by policy makers and practitioners alike. Some have suggested that the implementation of sustainable development through, for example, Local Agenda 21 initiatives will be possible only with local community consensus (Robinson, 1997). Petts (1995) argued that traditional participatory approaches have been reactive in that the public is expected simply to respond to previously formulated plans. The trend now is for proactive, consensus-building approaches that attempt to involve people in the decision-making process itself.

Applying environmental psychology Gärling and Hartig (2000) suggested that one of the shortcomings of environmental psychology is that environmental psychologists have only been able to provide general principles in response to the specific needs of practitioners. In short, it is suggested that there is an applications gap. While this may be a valid criticism of science in general, its validity in relation to environmental psychology should be challenged. If there is a gap, is it because environmental psychologists have failed to communicate with or convince other scientists and practitioners of the value of their work? Or is it because environmental psychologists have not delivered the kind of answers that practitioners such as architects and designers have required or were expecting or wanted? Perhaps environmental psychologists have been asking the wrong questions? Or does environmental psychology suffer from a shortage of data? Some might argue that we need better theoretical ways of understanding the data that we have already.

Conclusion:

It may also be that those who have the task of drawing upon and implementing the results of environmental psychological and other behavioural science research become frustrated at the amount of time, financial resources, and effort that go into generating marginal increases in the amount of variance explained in a set of data. Increasing the amount of variance explained from 33% to 35% is important, but we really need to be far more imaginative in our theoretical and conceptual approaches in order to make serious inroads into the 65% of the variance unaccounted for.

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