



INTRODUCTION — SPECIAL PLACES

Robert Gifford

University of Victoria

This, the third special issue of JEP that I have had the pleasure of editing, focuses on places. Why ‘places’? Environmental psychology might be construed as a discipline that seeks to understand the dynamics among four multifaceted dimensions: persons (personality, sex, age, role, etc.); psychological processes (learning, cognition, privacy, etc.); environmental problems (nuclear power, pollution, poor architectural design, etc.) and places (home, work, community, etc.). Although every study takes place in a particular place (or two), a very large proportion of current research downplays those particular places in favor of emphasizing various combinations of the first three of these dimensions. Places, the fourth dimension, has been relatively neglected as a focus of research.

I suppose the emphasis on persons, problems and processes stems from our desire to discover generalizable truths. We hope to discover relations that will hold up not only in our own place, but much more widely—if not universally. Often, this is little more than a polite fiction: virtually all studies are conducted in particular places and, strictly speaking, should not be generalized beyond that setting. In that sense, most research already is about particular places, but researchers downplay this fact because it does not please the god of generalizability.

This special issue was inspired by the belief that we *can* learn something about the universal from the particular, even when we openly trumpet the fact that we studied a specific location. Sommer and Wicker (1991) called this ‘gas station psychology’. Earlier, Barker (1968) called it the study of behavior settings. Of course, studies of particular places do not automatically yield insights for a more universal environmental psychology. From some studies of one place we learn only about pragmatic aspects of that place, and no one need care except those with a personal stake in that place. In editing this issue, and in certain other manuscripts I have

been asked to review, this unredeemed provinciality was painfully apparent. Psychology and journalism are two distinct professions, and psychologists should leave pure journalism to the experts in that field. In contrast, I trust that the articles in this special issue will usefully inform readers beyond those with an interest in the places themselves; if they do, the issue will serve its intended purpose.

As David Canter noted when hearing about these contributors, these articles have a decided anthropological cast to them. Dare we hope that they portend a more global, exploratory direction for environmental psychology? Perhaps readers of this issue will recognize an enlarged window on the world: how might environmental psychology elucidate person–environment relations in a broader world context?

A fine example of the anthropological extension of environmental psychology is Robert Hay’s exposition of sense of place among Maori and European-descended residents of, and migrants from, the Banks Peninsula in New Zealand. Hay considers sense of place to be a developmental process. His interviews with 350 Banks Peninsula folk illustrate his position in a convincing way. The insights in Hay’s article are illuminated by the cultural contrasts and similarities that will be apparent to readers who are not familiar with the customs and thinking of these groups.

Ingrid Leman Stefanovich brings a phenomenological approach to the issue in her comparative treatment of two very different places, an ancient seaside village on the Adriatic Sea and a modern industrial suburb in central Canada. Her theme, in part, is the difference in sense of place when the major landmarks of a community are either large spiritual structures that evoke a sense of tradition and human finitism, or unpeopled streets running through carefully territorialized properties whose most noticeable feature is a garage door.

Robert Sommer offers an insider’s view of food

co-ops that exemplifies gas station psychology. Co-ops in North America offer much more than an economic alternative to the large chain stores. Co-ops differ in their patron make-up, physical form, the motives of their patrons, their organization, the products on the shelves and in the bins, and of course in their ideology. These alternative features of the co-op behavior setting help illuminate (by way of contrast) the persons, processes, and issues that characterize the corporate food enterprise in North America. In this way, Sommer's article becomes an anthropology of the familiar, which may be the most difficult form, in the sense of fish investigating water.

For immigrants, the destination country is always special, which is not to say that the experience is always positive. I know a family who just returned to Hong Kong after six years of trying to make Canada their home. Cheuk Fan Ng's explication of Canada as a new place is in part her own story of a struggle to survive and prosper in a strange land. In many ways, it mirrors the story of untold millions of immigrants around the world who choose hope and an uncertain future over the familiar realities of their native land. In her survey of environmental psychology's principles applied to the immigration experience, we are given an

account that offers insights beyond the story of one person's emigration to one country.

Special places come in different sizes. Interestingly, the authors of the articles in this issue consider four scales of setting: the building, the community, the region, and the nation. Both natural and built environments are discussed. Special places can be even smaller—one's favorite chair—or as large as the planet.

And so we offer this sampling of what a special-places or anthropological environmental psychology might be, a facet of the field that gives pride of place to the settings themselves without neglecting the persons, processes, and issues dimensions that comprise a complete environmental psychology. We hope these slices of possibility inspire more work on the meaning and importance of special places in our lives.

References

- Barker, R. (1968). *Ecological Psychology: Concepts and Methods for Studying the Environment of Human Behavior*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sommer, R. & Wicker, A. W. (1991). Gas station psychology: The case for specialization in ecological psychology. *Environment and Behavior* **23**, 131–149.