



## Environmental psychology: Manifold visions, unity of purpose

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### A B S T R A C T

An attempt is made to understand and integrate the different perspectives on and approaches to environmental psychology. As a whole, the field is oriented to fundamental science, to practice, and to informing policy. Some approaches focus more on the person, some more on the environment, but all acknowledge its unity of purpose to understand the complex relations between people and the built, natural, and living environments around them. Environmental psychology is developing around the world from its North American and European roots, and this growth is enriching its collective vision. Interest in human transactions with the built environment remains, and concern for the natural world, including the optimizing of human relations with other species and the planet is very strong; these manifold visions are the very definition of environmental psychology.

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“...and these visions of Johanna...kept me up past the dawn.”  
Bob Dylan

As Editor, the task falls to me to attempt a summary and integration of the wise and well-informed statements in this special issue about the current and future directions of environmental psychology. I do so with great enthusiasm, because the authors collectively have offered such a rich set of visions that to consider them is like walking into a wondrous roomful of radiant lamps that dazzle with effulgent hues and multifaceted shapes.

In brief, what have we here? These articles include practical guidelines, sets of principles, proposed unifications, glances at history, the championing of theories, and calls for broader perspectives: visions of how it has been, how it is, and how it should be. I believe that if these authors could have a long and cordial pow-wow in a comfortable place, they could create a single extensive and cohesive monograph based on the ideas in these articles that would meet the approval of all concerned. Put another way, I would suggest that although each article emphasizes different aspects, dimensions, qualities, or goals of environmental psychology, little or no serious disagreement with the ideas of the other authors would ensue; that each of these articles necessarily is more a matter of a favorite or familiar aspect of a grand unified vision than a vision that is incompatible with the others. At least that is my vision!

The opening article (Steg & Vlek, 2009) is an elegant roadmap for behavioral scientists and others whose goal is to change

behaviors that mar the person–environment relationship, preferably sooner rather than “sometime.” It provides a practical and sturdy step-by-step approach to getting the job done now, while recognizing that behavior change is not as simple as it may appear. Attention must be paid to contextual factors, to motivational factors, to the appropriateness of the contingencies implemented, and to shifting preferences for policy options. Taken as a whole, Steg and Vlek importantly buttress the case for including environmental psychology in the creation and evaluation of both new knowledge and policy through careful empirical research (see also Gifford, 2008).

But environmental psychology is also a discipline of scientific principles. The authors of the second contribution (Winkel, Saegert, Evans, & Uzzell, 2009) advocate a set of six such principles, broadly described as an ecological approach. This contribution might be viewed as one that necessarily and understandably complicates the approach described in the previous article. Winkel et al. seem to be saying that the field needs to become even more sophisticated if it is to fulfill its mandate. They note the need for what seems to me to be a fresh or similar call for representative design (Brunswick, 1956), that is, to sample both populations and environments in the course of our investigations. Winkel et al. rightly remind us that many environment–behavior relations are best understood in terms of mediators and moderators, which is too often forgotten. Winkel et al. also argue that temporal factors should be brought into investigations of many other, or even all, environment–behavior contexts as well.

Finally, Winkel et al. call for multi-level modeling, the statistical technique that feels like the “next big thing” in data analysis. However, having also witnessed a few previous “next big things” in

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data analysis, I can't help injecting a note of caution to anyone who thinks that multi-level modeling is the perfect solution to all or most data analytic situations. Sometimes new analytic tools are used primarily because they are the *outil de jour* rather than the *mot juste*. Not that there's anything wrong with multi-level modeling!

Stephen Kaplan and Rachel Kaplan (2009) adopt a different approach, suggesting a particular theoretical perspective for environmental psychology, the reasonable person model. At the heart of this approach are human informational needs, the further consideration of which would allow the field to realize a "far larger" potential to help humanity than it now possesses. This is rather an ambitious claim, one that puts a greater emphasis on the importance of informational processing than some others would place on it.

The Kaplans raise another issue of crucial importance, that of collaborating with other disciplines. No reputable environmental psychologist would claim that we can save the world with our own knowledge and methods alone, yet we often collaborate less with other disciplines than we could or should. Of course, some formidable barriers to this exist: differences in fundamental paradigms, histories of development in separate "silos," which has led to different vocabularies (sometimes for the very same construct!), and disciplinary pride and prejudice. But collaborate we must, if real progress toward solving the problems of the world is to be made.

Environmental psychologists have long recognized that the causal arrows point in both directions, from persons to the environment and back again. Uzzell and Rätzhel (2009), however, make this a central tenet of their vision. Transactional approaches to any and all of the problems that environmental psychologists attempt to understand and solve have been suggested for decades, but are rarely employed, at least in studies that have crossed my editorial desk. Why is this? I would suggest that we still lack the analytical tools needed to deal with transactional approaches. (If someone wishes to suggest that they *do* exist and that I appear to be ignorant of them, I would reply that I still have almost never seen them used in a submission to this journal.) Perhaps we can describe person–environment relations with transactional lenses in a satisfactory way by employing a narrative approach, but we seem to be stumped when it comes to empirical transactional investigations. Thus, a challenging question for the attractive but elusive transactional approach may be how to make it work in everyday empirical research.

In a related vein, Moser (2009) suggests that environmental psychology must pay attention to the interrelations between people and their environments. He emphasizes the importance of the fit between persons and their settings, with the obvious implication that too often that fit is poor and needs improvement. Moser stresses that we should not examine only the person or only the environment; the match between the two is the essential issue. He also reminds us of that eternal and crucial issue, the relations between the objective and subjective. Human well-being requires congruity between the two. The environment may not be in the head, as Wohlwill (1973) pointed out long ago, but people's assessments of the environments (which *are* in their heads) are absolutely important to their mental and physical health.

The question of *how* we conduct research is picked up by Günther (2009). Reprising the idea of sampling both populations and environments, Günther suggests a different way of considering this by suggesting that we turn a critical eye to the research process itself – researchers as the "population" and the objects of their study as "environment." This raises a host of important questions, such as how and why do environmental psychologists select a particular topic to study, what might be our motives in doing so, why do we ask *this* question about the topic and not *that* one, and

how might the environments in which we conduct our studies affect the outcomes. Günther's use of canonical correlation as a metaphor for this made me smile; here is a good example of an *outil de jour* that is well known to those of us trained in the 1970s, a technique trumpeted by some at the time as the next big thing in data analysis, but one that has fallen off the radar; in 7 years as Editor of JEP, I do not think I have seen one submission that used canonical correlation. Could it be that in three decades, virtually no one will use multi-level modeling? What will be the *next* "next big thing" in data analysis?

Another important issue raised by Günther, one not at all unrelated to the theme of examining the researcher's acts, is that of globalization. Clearly, some researchers from emerging countries approach the research act differently in some important ways than do most researchers who work in the traditional environmental psychology countries. Among the various traditional and the emerging approaches to research, is one best? Are they (really) complementary? These are questions the field will have to face, and in fact are questions that this editor already faces: in 2008, authors from 37 different countries submitted manuscripts to JEP, and the number increases every year. Some of these submissions from non-traditional regions receive negative assessments from JEP's reviewers who are mainly from the traditional regions. Are these assessments valid (the study was poorly done by scientific standards widely accepted in the traditional regions), unfairly "trad-centric" (well done by standards of inquiry that are or would be accepted in non-traditional regions), or both?

The next article smoothly follows this theme. Corral-Verdugo and Pinheiro (2009) describe environmental psychology as it is currently practiced in Latin America, and its potential there. (As Editor, I should note that, ideally, this special issue would have included similar articles about other regions, including Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, where one presumes that other fundamentally different worldviews can be found. The editors of the special issue are not to blame for this; the special issue is expressed based on contributions to a particular symposium, and participants from some emerging communities were not in attendance. Also, limited space in this issue also is a factor.) Corral-Verdugo and Pinheiro elegantly explicate how the indigenous peoples and even the Euro-originated populations in their region have psychologies that vary considerably from those in the more economically-developed regions of the world. Among these differences are a tendency to holistic worldviews that many traditional environmental psychologists may recognize on paper, but do not truly experience within themselves, a more emotion-oriented approach to the social and physical environment, and a more collective sense of society. What do these differences mean for a fully developed, future vision of environmental psychology as a whole? Corral-Verdugo and Pinheiro offer their ideas for this potential development.

Finally, Giuliani and Scopelliti (2009) examine publication (and presumably research interest) trends in environmental psychology. In a very impressive empirical analysis of these trends, they consider changes in terms of how the environment is presented, how populations are sampled, types of transactions, research topics, etc. Veterans of this field will not be surprised to learn that built settings were the focus of most early research and that sustainability and related concerns have been the main focus of recent efforts. However, it must not be overlooked that research on built environments has not declined; Giuliani and Scopelliti demonstrate that architecture-related studies have been conducted at a stable pace over the years. Nor should it be overlooked that what we now call sustainability-related research was being conducted by environmental psychologists in the 1970s. Environmental psychology has always examined both major themes.

## 2. Some concluding thoughts

What is environmental psychology anyway? Is there a whole, of which the contributions to this special issue constitute a kind of partial outline, or even a complete image? I think the answer lies somewhere between; a perusal of this journal's contents for even one year, let alone its 28+ volumes, certainly would reveal a more complex vision than could ever be squeezed into one special issue. Despite the manifold visions described in these articles, and those to be found in earlier volumes of JEP, in other journals, in the textbooks, and in conference presentations, I prefer to believe that the field does have an essential unity to it, one that distinguishes it from other disciplines. This unity, as pointed out directly by several of authors in this issue and implicitly by others, is inherent in the nature of the complex transactions between people (at the psychological level of analysis) and their built and natural environments, including parks, wilderness, resources, animals, and plants. Some have suggested hiving off parts of the field with other names; I see this as a mistake. Let me quote from the introductory essay in the very first issue of this journal, by its founding editors, David Canter and Kenneth Craik (1981):

“This perspective on the field carries the warning not to restrict its definition and domain through premature and overly narrow definition. For instance, any formulation of the field based solely upon issues derived from architectural design and urban planning would not have anticipated the research topics subsequently generated by the environmental movement and the current concern with energy policy. A difficult balance must be achieved to avoid the abandonment, when the popular interest in them wanes, of earlier topics which have been only partially examined, whilst at the same time preventing foreclosure to new themes and responsiveness to contemporary public concerns” (p. 7).

Thus, as long as the issue centrally concerns transactions between people and *any* aspect of the environment, environmental

psychology should be the umbrella under which we work. The pioneers of the field were wise to drop the early, narrow label “architectural psychology.” As a relatively small part of psychology, but the only part of it that seriously engages research, theory, and practice concerned with the built and natural environment, united we must stand, because divided, our field risks being absorbed into another sub-discipline or, more likely, being completely overlooked on the landscape of science, practice, and policy. Onward, toward a generous and unified vision of environmental psychology!

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