Environmental Psychology in Context¹

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Introduction

Several years ago, an International Symposium was jointly organised by the *International Association for People-Environment Studies* and the University of São Paulo, on ‘The Role of Environmental Psychology in the Study of Environmental Issues’. Its objective was to promote environmental psychology in a region where environmental problems are of a scale and seriousness almost unmatched (e.g., the destruction of rainforests, the expansion of cities and development of slum areas, waste accumulation, etc.). However, it became apparent during the symposium that in the process of discussing the application of environmental psychology to issues of the ‘South’, this was a critical time for environmental psychology itself. While this Special Issue on “**Environmental Psychology in Context**” emerged from discussions during the symposium, additionally we invited several authors to contribute because of the particular experience and perspectives that they have contributed to environmental psychology over many years. We asked all the contributors to consider five key questions:

¹ Uzzell, D. & Moser, G. (2009). Introduction: environmental psychology on the move. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 29, 307-308.

1. What is the specific contribution of environmental psychology as an approach to people-environment relationships in areas such as housing, global climate change, transport, sustainability, conservation, natural environments, and to what extent has environmental psychology contributed to the discipline of psychology?
2. What is the main focus of environmental psychology today, and what are its strengths and weaknesses?
3. What do we know about people-environment relationships and, more importantly, what do we still need to know?
4. How should environmental psychology develop over the next 5-10 years in terms of theoretical and methodological issues, as well as areas for investigation?
5. What knowledge, competences and expertise do we need from other disciplines to make environmental psychology more effective?

Not surprisingly, these questions were addressed in different ways, but running through all of the papers is the primacy of context in its many guises. Context emerged unbidden in many of the papers, and has consequently been treated in different ways whether it refers to the growing interest and importance of indigenous psychologies, as opposed to assumed universal theories and perspectives, to explain human actions and practices or the informational context which fosters “reasonable behavior”. It is often suggested that one of the qualities of environmental psychology that serves to define and distinguish it from other areas of psychology is the importance, if not the centrality, it gives to context: there is no social environment that is not touched in some way by its physical context, and likewise every physical environment gains social meaning through culture. One of the challenges for environmental psychology is to persuade other areas of the discipline that environmental context is not simply a neutral backdrop to human agency but a critical part of the story. This

discussion is not new to environmental psychology, but in this issue it is raised in interesting and research-rich ways.

The terms environmental psychology, environment-behaviour research and people-environment relationships are all terms which are sometimes used interchangeably, but often in an attempt to be inclusive where environmental psychology seems to exclude the design professions. These are, however, contested terms because they are not simply descriptions or even field boundaries but sources of identity, priority, philosophy and epistemology. These labels are clearly not synonymous as **Vittoria Giuliani and Massimiliano Scopelliti** demonstrate based on their analysis of the two principal journals in the field (i.e., *Environment & Behavior*, and *Journal of Environmental Psychology*). Their review highlights important differences between environmental psychology in the strict sense and the study of people-environment relationships in the broad sense. Furthermore, while re-branding the area as environment-behaviour studies might lead to a more inclusive research community, one also has to recognise that the strength of psychology's contribution is in its scientific, evidence-based approach to understanding people-environment relations. This is not to suggest that other approaches are less valuable and that the psychologist's approaches are the right way or the only way – they are simply different and may rely on different forms of evidence. The contribution of environmental psychology to the academic and professional community is precisely because we are psychologists and come with particular ways of thinking and with an empirical science tradition.

It is noteworthy that for a number of the contributors the multi-disciplinary nature of environmental psychology is a crucial issue. The starting point of **Gary Winkel, Susan Saegert and Gary Evans'** paper is one of recalling the principles that guided the field's

foundation, and warning of the sub-discipline's 'increasing insularity' with the potential for it to become an historical curiosity. Having identified six key themes and principles that have characterised the field of environmental psychology they chose to focus on the implementation of a multi-disciplinary approach to environmental psychology and methodological and data analytic strategies that reflect the contextual nature of person/environment relations.

David Uzzell and Nora Räthzel begin their paper by arguing that values, attitudes and norms are embedded, nurtured and emerge from a social context and a set of social relations resulting in specific everyday cultures. Consequently, an environmental psychology that seeks to understand people-environment relationships needs to move from a focus on individuals and groups to the social relations within which environmental behaviour is enacted and unsustainable ways of living are produced and reproduced. For environmental psychology, this requires a theoretical approach that takes its starting point the idea that individuals are the sum of their social relations, i.e., they are the cause and consequence of their relations to others and the environment. The task should be to examine the reciprocity between people and environment and the ways in which they mutually reproduce the material conditions for their existence. Thus, instead of treating values, attitudes and norms as independent variables as is typically the case in psychology, the emphasis in a transformative environmental psychology should shift to the relations of production and consumption and the social and political relations within which values, attitudes and behaviours are formed.

Such a position seems poles apart from the assertion of **Stephan and Rachel Kaplan** who argue that people are more likely to be reasonable in environments that support their informational needs. They too argue that the context of human action plays a crucial role in

everyday life. For them, the cardinal principle of environmental psychology is that the environment (i.e., the circumstances) makes a difference, and “understanding the circumstances that foster reasonable behavior is a matter of great urgency.” The environment is the starting point simply because it “...has a crucial impact on human cognition, action, and well-being has a far larger potential to aid humanity than is generally realized.” Providing an environment that supports people’s informational and affective needs is the basis of what they refer to as the Reasonable Person Model.

Using statistical models to think about patterns of relationships can be useful, and **Hartmut Günther** draws on the assumptions and relationships embedded in canonical correlation analysis to frame his analysis of people-environment relationships and the role of environmental psychology. By these means he tries to go beyond disciplinary differences and situate the analysis of people-environment relationships in different settings. Furthermore, he sees this as a reflexive issue and argues that the very act of thinking about and conducting research is a social phenomenon that takes place *somewhere*. Günther concludes by discussing the emic (i.e. culture-specific) versus etic (i.e. culturally neutral) dilemma for researchers and practitioners. He provides a tool to analyse the ways the disciplines involved in people-environment studies approach various problematic issues with which they are confronted.

To date environmental psychology has largely been the product of academic endeavour in ‘developed’ countries, the global North – i.e., Europe, North America and part of the Pacific Rim. This is not to say that environmental psychology has been absent elsewhere – what has been absent have been resources and influence as **José Pinheiro and Victor Corral-Verdugo** point out. So called ‘indigenous psychology’ reflects the environment, culture and

life-worlds of Latin American societies. It provides another perspective on the emic/etic dilemma highlighted by Günther. The roots of such a psychology are to be found in the emotional relation of Latin Americans with their environment and their holistic worldviews. Indigenous psychology is likely to be a contentious idea that challenges the very canons of scientific endeavour. On the other hand, one can imagine that it will have a resonance both for environmental psychologists who are sensitive to place and for researchers across Latin America, as well as Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

The final two papers continue the theme of the need for more theory-based research, but discuss this by reference to two specific issues which have been very much the focus of environmental psychological research and application over the last few years, ‘quality of life’ and ‘sustainable development’. Environmental psychology has to position itself, argues **Gabriel Moser**, within an interdisciplinary nexus by promoting person-centred analyses of people-environment relations. Moser shows how, looking at individuals’ perceptions, cognitions and feelings in a specific environment allows an understanding of the complex relation between the individual and his/her lifespace. Such a point of view permits one to address ‘quality of life issues’ which provide a challenging starting point for building theories, and emphasises the original approach that environmental psychology can offer.

Climate change and the need for sustainable development is dominating government agendas across the globe and **Linda Steg and Charles Vlek** make the case for the important contribution that environmental psychologists can make to the sustainable development of society. The value of Steg and Vlek’s contribution is that their focus is on understanding and changing *behaviour*, thereby redressing an imbalance which has seen perhaps too much attention being paid to environmental attitudes when we know that the relationship between

environmental attitudes and behaviour is at best uncertain and in the case of sustainable development not very helpful. The priorities for Steg and Vlek are more theory-based research.