

**Oregon State Bar
Sustainable Future Section**

Photo: J. Michael Mattingly

The Long View

Psychology as if the Whole World Mattered

By Thomas Joseph Doherty

My professional specialty is a branch of psychology that looks at our human relationship with and our thinking about nature. This nature-focused psychology – sometimes called “environmental psychology,” “conservation psychology” or “ecopsychology,” – informs how we interact with the earth.

By psychology, I mean the study of the human mind, emotions, behavior, identity, and mental health, as well as the applications of that study. This is a huge field. Yet almost every area of psychology can be re-visited in an ecological way.

Psychology has always looked beyond our human skin. It would be difficult not to. For example, great nature writers have been concerned with mind, emotions, behavior, and identity and, by implication, mental health. In recent decades, particularly since the advent of the modern environmental movement, these concerns have been more directly taken up in psychological science and practice.

A long-standing subfield of psychology — environmental psychology—looks at basic scientific questions related to how people interact with built and natural spaces, an important question in, for example, the architectural field. Recently, a group of psychologists have advanced “conservation psychology,” modeled after conservation biology, to examine how conservation professionals working to protect endangered species can bring psychological expertise to their work on advocacy and policy.

Another group drawn from both inside and outside psychology has advanced “ecopsychology,” a more holistic variation on the theme. Ecopsychology con-

cerns our direct, embodied experience as part of a greater natural system. This group addresses not only matters related to the mind, emotions, and behavior, but also delves deeply into the more value-laden questions of what is ethical, healthy or even “sane” in relation to the rest of the planetary community. Because this branch of psychology relies on an eco-centric perspective, this might be called “psychology as if the whole earth mattered.”

I was drawn to ecopsychology after years doing wilderness therapy with young people, being a professional rafting guide in the Grand Canyon (my most comprehensive “environmental education” experience), becoming still more environmentally aware and active through work for Green Peace. I later received training as a clinical and health psychologist.

Living at this time of advanced ecological degradation, I know my work and study in these environmental psychologies will never be “done.” Questions about our relationship with the natural world continue to unfold. In a personal sense, an ecological perspective now permeates my day-to-day psychology practice, and rather than only personal health, I discuss “personal sustainability.”

Almost every personal, community or organizational problem involves a loss of balance and a feeling that the situation cannot or should not continue. So, whether one is working on forming healthy relationships, being more assertive, exercising more, spending more time outdoors, changing the way one commutes to work, or becoming more conscious of their eco-footprint, one begins to behave “as if the whole world mattered.”

(Continued on page 2)

**Oregon State Bar
Sustainable Future Section****Psychology as if the Whole World Mattered** (continued)

(Continued from page 1)

Ecopsychology and by extension eco-therapies (counseling approaches that leverage the health promoting aspects of nature contact or explore the emotional impacts of environmental problems) are relatively new, and untested. In their naïve forms, they are environmentalism with a psychological gloss, recycling well-meaning pop psychology ideas like the “ecological unconscious” or cherry picking psychological research (like the health of benefits of green spaces, of which are many) without acknowledging the risks or contraindications of using an eco-therapy, or the ideology underlying seeming selfless appeals to health or sanity.

But, we are also moving forward on what I have taken to calling “conventional” and “radical” ecopsychology. The former includes seeding ecological ideas within the mental health system (for example, through the Ecopsychology in Counseling Certificate program I helped to create at Lewis & Clark Graduate School), and the later embodying grass roots approaches that re-vision the very nature of psychology or mental health practice along more bioregional, indigenous, and permacultural lines.

In psychology, a grand theory for understanding the development of environmental advocacy or activism in individuals is called “values, beliefs, norms” theory. It is actually an integration of a number of different research findings. Think of it as a pathway: there are certain basic qualities that predispose people toward environmental action. For example, if one tends to be more altruistic and to think about the welfare of others, that person is also more likely to be concerned about nature—in the guise of other species, natural places or threats to global environmental health such as human-influenced (and by implication at least partly human-controllable) climate change. Even if one is not by internal nature altruistic, a sense of egoism

and concern for one’s own welfare may propel a person to care about outer nature.

Those who develop an ecological worldview, rather than one in which humans are exempt from the laws of nature, move further along the line towards action. Another key question is whether a person senses a threat, either to him or herself, important places or other species. A sense of adverse consequences for something that is valued moves that person further along the line. But, there are other key steps before action. One needs to possess self-efficacy, a belief that he or she has the ability to do something. That often leads to a sense of responsibility, an obligation to do something, to step up and take action. Even if a person possesses ecological values and beliefs, and perceives a threat, if that person does not have a sense of personal empowerment and possibility—he or she is likely to feel powerless and apathetic, and to stop somewhere along the pathway to action.

Other topics for further discussion include emotional intelligence, dignified coping and perseverance in the face of environmental threats, being savvy about messaging and behavior change, and what I mentioned earlier, “personal sustainability”—making sure your sustainability plan includes your own self and your own health, so that you can be effective and resilient for the long haul.

I hope this article has given you a flavor of ecopsychology, a topic with many dimensions. If you are interested in pursuing the topic further, I can be reached at thomas@selfsustain.com.

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