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Reviewing Ecopsychology Research: Exploring Five Databases and Considering the Future

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Abstract

This brief article aims to provide an overview of the current dispersal of the term ecopsychology within the academic literature. It summarizes the results found when entering the term ecopsychology into five academic databases. The numbers of hits are discussed and comparisons are made with other related terms. The results are further broken down to provide a snapshot of the type of material referred to in these searches. A more detailed inspection of the material referenced in journal articles is undertaken. Here, popular outlets and dates of publication are highlighted. A final search for articles that report original research data directly associated with ecopsychology is also reported. Possible reasons for the low yield and the implications of this are highlighted along with suggested pathways forward.

Introduction

The beginning of a new journal provides a useful space and opportunity with which to look back and survey the context from which a publication arose. It also allows the possibility of looking forward and guessing about the possibilities and challenges the journal might face. Coming to know this journal, I was pleased to note the editors' decision to include a research section. Providing a clearly defined space where those interested in ecopsychology can present their research results will hopefully encourage the publication of pre-existing evidence as well as stimulate the design, collection, and dissemination of new data.

Research and Data

In applied psychology and mental health, many researchers have empirically documented the effects of psychotherapy. The first watermark in this field was published by Eysenck in 1952. Barkham (2007) reviewed the decades of research that has passed since and divided the collected evidence into that concerning *outcome* (whether something is effective or not) and *process* (why it is effective).

More recently, the importance of "evidence-based practice" has steadily grown. Evidence-based practice is described by Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, and Richardson (1996) as "the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions" (p. 71). In evidence-based practice, "best evidence" refers to something specific, that is, a type of evidence that is more relevant than other types of evidence. This ranking of evidence has become so widespread that in 2001 the U.K. Department of Health published rankings of the level of evidence for different psychotherapeutic treatments' so that members of the public could decide which treatment to opt for.

For an area to be progressive, it needs to collect data about its outcome and the processes involved in what it claims to do. If we turned from the examination of psychology and mental health to ecopsychology, what work would we find and what data would be revealed?

Aims

This brief article seeks to review the current penetration of the term *ecopsychology* in the academic literature. Rather than providing a detailed systematic review of the ecopsychology literature, the more modest aims of this article are to:

1. provide a snapshot of the spread of the term ecopsychology within certain academic databases, and
2. highlight those papers meeting the first criteria in peer-reviewed academic journals that also present original data findings.

Search Methodology

Searches were conducted on the 25th of November 2008. The term ecopsychology was entered in the databases. No restrictions were placed on where the term could be found, in order to maximize search results. Four related terms (*ecological psychology*, *ecotherapy*, *environmental psychology*, and *wilderness experience*) were also searched for the purpose of comparison. Terms that contained more than one word were searched for within quotation marks to minimize search results (e.g., to only find results for “ecological psychology” as a complete phrase, not “ecological” and “psychology”).

Databases Searched

Five databases were searched: BioMed Central (BMC), the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), PsycINFO, PubMed, and the Web of Science.

BioMed Central (BMC) focuses on open access publications and produces more than 180 scientific journals. The International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) is produced by the London School of Economics and Political Science; it focuses on anthropology, economics, politics, and sociology. PsycINFO is a database of psychological literature provided by the American Psychological Association. PubMed is a search engine for the MEDLINE database, run by the U.S. National Library of Medicine; the core subjects are medicine, nursing, and other allied health disciplines. Finally, the Web of Science acts as an umbrella body for five databases, the Science Citation Index (SCI), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), Index Chemicus, and Current Chemical Reactions. These five databases were selected for their diversity in subject area, high-quality indexing, and good coverage of topic areas that are relevant to psychology and potentially ecopsychology.

Results

Aim 1: A snapshot of the spread of ecopsychology

Table 1 shows the results of searching the five databases for the term ecopsychology. A total of 141 results were obtained. This was reduced to 125 results when repeated hits were taken into account. Table 1 also shows the number of hits for related four terms—ecological psychology, ecotherapy, environmental psychology, and wilderness experience. The results indicate that three of the four terms produce substantially more hits than ecopsychology, with only ecotherapy resulting in less. Although environmental psychology resulted in more than 10 times the number

of hits, it needs to be remembered that it has a much longer history than that of ecopsychology. Of course, this alone is not enough to explain the disparity, and it is clear that much more academic activity currently takes place in this and other areas than within ecopsychology itself.

It is possible that work relevant to one field (e.g., ecopsychology) could be labeled and published under different terminology (e.g., environmental psychology). However, the fact that this work is not immediately ascribed to ecopsychology is still of interest and explored further in the discussion.

Table 2 illustrates a further breakdown of the results for ecopsychology from Table 1. Specifically, it clarifies the make-up of the 125 hits from the five academic databases. Of most interest to this article is the 53% of hits that relate to journal articles. Before these are analyzed further, it is worth briefly highlighting other aspects of the table.

Books, parts of books, or reviews of the same make up around one fifth of the total number of hits. By far the most popular three books that were mentioned in this review were: *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* by Theodore Roszak (1992); *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (edited by Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995); and *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life* by Andy Fisher (2002).

A quarter of the hits are dissertation abstracts. Although it is reassuring that this work is being done, it can only be hoped that this work was or will be submitted for publication and then will appear under the “journal article” heading. Currently, unless the

Table 1. Number of Hits for Ecopsychology and Related Terms Within the Five Databases

	BMC	IBSS	PsycINFO	PubMed	Web of Science	TOTALS
Ecopsychology	0	26	89	0	26	141
Ecological psychology	1	16	749	30	237	1033
Ecotherapy	0	0	4	1	2	7
Environmental psychology	9	185	1202	56	377	1829
Wilderness experience	0	2	252	3	72	329

Abbreviations: BMC, BioMed Central; IBSS, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences.

Table 2. Hits for Ecopsychology Indexed by Content

TYPE OF HIT	<i>n</i>	%
Book/edited book/book chapter	16	13
Book review	8 ^a	6
Conference paper	3	2
Dissertation abstract ^b	31	25
Journal article	66	53
Reference entry	1 ^c	1
Total	125	100

^aIncluding one video review. This does not include all book reviews; some are included within journals articles (see Table 3).

^bThese are examples of original research that have been completed as part of a graduate/postgraduate degrees, particularly PhDs. Dissertations from universities in North America are typically indexed and abstracted in *Dissertation Abstracts International* and it is these records that show up within this table.

^cAuthored entry in encyclopedia.

latter has already happened, the content of these dissertations are not included in this review.

Aim 2: Highlighting the articles containing original data

Table 3 further breaks down the content of the articles published in journals within the five databases. Journal articles were initially assigned to categories on the basis of their title and abstract. If any uncertainty remained after this first stage, the full article was downloaded or requested for study and clarification.

It is worth noting that the databases searched included content that was blind peer reviewed, less strictly peer reviewed, and non-peer reviewed. Some outlets openly sit on the cusp between academic and more popular journalism (e.g., *Alternatives* magazine or *Psychology Today*).

Table 4 highlights the journals containing most ecopsychology-associated content—listing their name, the number of articles published and the current publisher of the journal. It also clarifies whether all the relevant articles came within one issue such as a special edition and whether the articles have been published since the year 2000.

While focusing on the temporal nature of these works it is worth reviewing the dates of the articles uncovered. A limited number of hits (5) were returned between the years 1979 and 1989. All of these articles were either published in a German-language

Table 3. Ecopsychology Journal Articles Indexed by Content

TYPE OF HIT	<i>n</i>	%
Book review	8 ^a	12
Containing original data	2	3
Not containing original data	49	74
Not written in English	5	8
Interview	2	3
Total	66	100

^aIncluded in the "Journal article" total in Table 2.

journal (4) or an English-language journal focusing on developments in another country (specifically, Mexico [1]). Though yearly publication rates from the early 90s until now vary, consistencies in measures of average point to relative stability (mean, 3.6 articles per year; mode and median, both 3 articles a year). Yearly figures are artificially inflated by journals publishing more than one ecopsychology article within an issue, by replies to articles, or by book reviews, which tend to cluster temporally around the books publication date.

This section of the article had hoped to highlight the wealth of research data that has been ascribed to ecopsychology and published in peer-reviewed outlets. However, Table 3 suggests that more than 70% of journal articles found did not present new research data. Indeed, this percentage is substantially higher if the other proportion of results that describe book reviews and interviews (15%) is included. Essentially, very few of the database results reviewed for this article presented any kind of new research evidence (3%). Even in the few instances when this does occur, the articles only document and use evidence from case studies. Although the content of the other 97% undoubtedly includes rigorous thought and analysis, it does not present original, data-driven research evidence.

Within this research, only two articles presented new data within the context of a peer-reviewed journal (Burns, 2000; Santostefano, 2008). Burns' article is a case study describing brief, couples-based therapy using integrative ecopsychology and nature-guided therapy. The article describes the work, its background, and its step-by-step application. It is clear that novel data are being presented here in support of a therapeutic technique allied with ecopsychology.

Table 4. Frequent Outlets for Ecopsychology Articles

TITLE	NUMBER OF ARTICLES	ALL IN THE SAME ISSUE?	ARTICLES SINCE 2000?	JOURNALS CURRENT PUBLISHER/URL
<i>Alternatives</i>	2	Yes	No	http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/
<i>Gestalt Journal</i>	2	Yes	No	http://www.gestalt.org/
<i>Gestalt Review</i>	3	Yes	No	Gestalt International Study Center
<i>Journal of Constructivist Psychology</i>	2	Yes	No	Routledge
<i>Journal of Environmental Psychology</i>	2	No	No	Elsevier
<i>Journal of Humanistic Psychology</i>	3	No	Yes	The Association for Humanistic Psychology
<i>Journal of Phenomenological Psychology</i>	2	No	Yes	Brill (http://www.brill.nl/)
<i>Psychoanalytic Dialogues</i>	2	Yes	Yes	Routledge
<i>The Humanistic Psychologist</i>	16	No ^a	Yes	Routledge

^a12 of 16 articles within one issue.

Santostefano's (2008) article argues from a position of relational psychoanalysis and attests to others' research and utilizes the author's clinical cases in support of the article's proposed model. Again, a case study is used to illustrate how, in this instance, developmental interferences could result in embodied metaphors.

To reiterate, many of the other articles reviewed included substantial historical evidence within their pages to support their arguments. However, the inclusion of novel data with which to further expand the empirical base of ecopsychology was, on the whole, notably absent.

Discussion

This article sought to provide a snapshot of the spread of the term ecopsychology and highlight the academic journal articles that presented original research data. As shown, the term itself generated an excess of 100 combined hits within 5 academic databases. Many of the hits concerned books or reviews of books. This is unsurprising considering that ecopsychology could be argued to have been founded on the basis of books published or edited by Theodore Roszak (Roszak, 1992; Roszak et al., 1995).

Approximately half of the hits referred to the content of academic journals; however, only a tiny percentage of these refer to articles that bring new data-driven research to a wider audience. One of the chief questions that arises from this is how can ecopsychology progress as a discipline without more data-based research? Similarly, how does ecopsychology hope to persuade

others to be interested in its theoretical propositions if it cannot provide data to support its foundations?

It is interesting to note that many of the articles highlighted within the confines of this literature search were not solely about ecopsychology but ecopsychology in relation to other areas. The most frequently mentioned other areas were gestalt (Aylward, 1999; Swanson, 1995), psychodynamics/psychoanalysis (Santostefano, 2008; Spitzform, 2000), and phenomenology (Adams, 2005). Other areas that were paired with ecopsychology included Christianity (Sneep, 2007), neuropsychology (Sewall, 1998), population growth (Burke, 1996), and social work (Park, 1996). It is interesting that ecopsychology literature often has scholars from these other areas connecting to it. However, it seems that ecopsychology is less frequently developing and expanding as an independent scholarly area in its own right. Again, this might not be that surprising if it is remembered that ecopsychology as a stand-alone area rests, as yet, largely on the back of a small number of books. Theodore Roszak, for example, is a professor emeritus of history with interests in a variety of areas. His most recent work concerned American neoconservative foreign and domestic policy since the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks (Roszak, 2006). Andy Fisher, who wrote *Radical Ecopsychology*, is a psychotherapist in private practice. Again, though, the question is raised from where, within its own ranks, will the new directions in ecopsychology be established?

It is important to make clear that this article does not intend to disparage non-data-driven research. Academic work that does

not involve the generation of new data has a vital role to play in the development and advancement of the academy. However, an area that does not also ask questions about its outcomes and processes, collect data, and publish its results may struggle to move forward, particularly if it seeks to have an applied impact.

This review should not be seen to suggest that there is little evidence to support the foundations of ecopsychology. It is perhaps fairer to say that where such research has been undertaken and first published it is not, primarily, married to the term ecopsychology.

If ecopsychology-relevant research is being done, but not being paried with the term itself, it is important to understand why. Detailed examination of the possible reasons are beyond the scope of this article, but it is possible to speculate on some possibilities. It may be that researchers in parallel fields are not aware of ecopsychology. It may be that they are aware but do not think their research is relevant to ecopsychology. Alternatively, it may be that they are aware of ecopsychology and, despite seeing its relevance, the authors do not associate their academic and research values with ecopsychology or even disagree with them. It could even be that certain researchers may feel that association with ecopsychology, in its current form, may be damaging to the promotion and advancement of their research.

One useful way forward, if any of the above reasons are true, is obvious but worth restating: Ecopsychology and its adherents must be clear about their areas of interest, the scope of these areas, and the historical evidence that supports them. Then, of course, it is necessary to define research agendas in line with these interests and to actively pursue them by conducting and publishing novel research.

Limitations

As stated in the Methods section, ecopsychology was the only search term used. Although this was a deliberate strategy, the use of derivations and other related terms would have extended the number of results produced and, in all likelihood, the amount of data uncovered. Similarly, a more exhaustive search of other academic databases may have produced a greater number of hits. It is noteworthy, for example, that articles from "The Trumpeter" (a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal that particularly focuses on the Deep Ecology movement; ISSN 0832-6193) did not fall within the remit of this research. The journal was first published in 1983; however, despite this, the current managing editor (J. Ollerenshaw) noted that the journal has only recently been listed within the EBSCOhost database (personal communication,

February 12, 2009). Future extensions of this work should consider including this journal and the EBSCOhost index in its remit.

It is also possible that some of the articles examined in this work, which were deemed not to contain any new data, did in fact contain some. Initially only abstracts were examined, and a more detailed search of the article was undertaken only when it was found that new data might be present. However, due to the time-consuming nature of collecting, analyzing, and publishing new data, it would be unusual for new data not to feature prominently within the abstract of any journal article, but this possibility is conceivable.

Conclusion

In his 1995 article, writing from an environmental psychology perspective, Reser (1995) noted that to many people ecopsychology is "synonymous with new age pseudo-science and the alternative environmental and therapeutic fringe" (p. 241). More than 10 years later, in this new section of this new journal, there is the possibility to challenge these assertions.

The history of ecopsychology is not steeped in data-driven research, but this does not have to define its future. It is hoped that those who are passionate about this area can enrich it further by developing clear questions and research pathways that can sustain and grow this field.

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