Feeling Our Way in Ecopsychology

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At a recent conference, I was asked about ecopsychology. Specifically: What kind of approach did I take to try and understand the human-nature relationship? I dutifully talked about my research—how fractal geometry related to levels of physiological arousal and place preference, or how emotional states affected perceptions of the restorativeness of nature—talking about innate responses and possible evolutionary reasons for this and relating it all to the practical, therapeutic benefits of being in natural environments. The response was, well yes, but how did that explain the feelings of awe, of reverence, of need? How did I explain the transcendent experiences that many people have in natural settings, sometimes on an everyday basis? And that stopped me. I realized that, rather than explaining ecopsychology, I was rationalizing my being an ecopsychologist, trying to justify my research by just talking about what fits into current perceptions of what science should be. In short, I was ignoring what got me interested in ecopsychology in the first place: the feelings of excitement, of new ways of looking at the world, of different stories that were more meaningful to my own experiences, and that feeling of "coming home." I was falling into the same pattern of behavior that has so often annoyed me about mainstream psychology: the tendency to dismiss, or explain away as illusory, the difficult questions that undermine the simplicity of standard models. Self—an experience that most of us say we have—is illusory (e.g., Hood, 2012); consciousness, in some ways the driving force behind the creation of psychology, is illusory (Ebert & Wegner, 2011); any anomalous experiences (anomalous only in terms of psychological models, not in terms of how often or how widespread the experience is) are misperceptions or fabrications. I would hate to see ecopsychology go down this route, either purposefully or by default, trying to explain away by reducing, mechanizing, or even worse, dismissing the amazing, life-changing experiences that people (of many species) have.

I'm not against reductionist approaches in research—I've often argued in their favor with colleagues—but I want these to be integrated, to be something that helps us understand the experiences and behaviors instead of devaluing or abstracting them. The mainstream approach should be a part of ecopsychology, but more as a starting point than the core. We need to have a dialogue with other approaches, other ways of understanding; but if we lose sight (touch, hearing, smell, taste!) of the richness that drove the creation of ecopsychology as a distinct field, forget the failure of current models and perspectives to help us understand why we need to feel part of the natural world, ecopsychology simply becomes another aspect of environmental psychology (see Reser, 1995).

Most of us who trained as scientists have been brought up to think that we have to be objective, even though on some level it's acknowledged that there's no such thing as objectivity. There is still the idea that if you declare a passion, if you feel an emotion that pushes you in one direction or another, then somehow your results are biased, even worthless (e.g., Sternwedel, 2013). But we are only pretending if we think we can do otherwise. Usually what we mean when we say "That is good science" is that the researchers are either in favor of a certain hypothesis that fits in with the dominant scientific paradigm or are presenting results and arguments against a hypothesis that disputes that paradigm (dominant often meaning the one they favor). It is all too easy to dismiss people with the claim that they "care too much," are "involved" with their hypotheses, have "lost their objectivity," and so on. Or ignore the work of people who have a "vested interest" in their work (as if any of us employed by academic institutions do not!). But even more suspect are people who actually express a love for something.

This is where ecopsychology comes in: All the ecopsychologists I have met *love* nature. Andy Fisher talks about a psychology *in the service of* life (Fisher, 2002); I think of it more as a psychology *for the love of* life, in its broadest possible meaning. As ecopsychologists, I think we need to be honest. Many, if not all, of us are doing this *because* we have strong feelings about something, *because* we have strong emotions. Because we *feel* a connection to the rest of the living world, the planet, perhaps the universe. This is not a bad thing. It does not make us bad scientists. This is what keeps us going, gives us inspiration. It is also part of what differentiates ecopsychology from environmental psychology.

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We could reduce ecopsychology to the same kind of abstracted number crunching we often see in the various subdisciplines of psychology, where things can become so far removed from the real world that they become meaningless. Small data points piling up on one another until we build a huge edifice of something that is no longer real, no longer meaningful to anyone outside a laboratory or computer model. Don't get me wrong: I'm not against empirical, quantitative research. There's a place for empirical research of many types, from lab-based research to field work. But that shouldn't be all that it is. Ecopsychology has *values* inherent in what it does.

This doesn't mean that we should simply include experiential writing as an artistic adjunct to the "more scientific" research articles. Nor does it mean that we should focus exclusively on the practical applications of ecotherapy. We need to embrace and integrate all the different approaches and acknowledge that experiences are as valid as "objective" measurements when we are talking about a relationship, a connection. Fisher's radical ecopsychology is about the roots of those relationships, saying that we cannot hope to be ecopsychologists if we think we can abstract ("uproot") our selves from what we are trying to understand.

Roszak (1992, p. 14) described "the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum." This is a very profound statement. It is saying that we cannot separate out what we are looking at from the wider picture. Just as you cannot isolate a human in the lab in any real sense (though we do pretend), so as researchers, as conceptualists, as theorists, as practitioners, we cannot remove ourselves from the context of what we study: our motivations, the world we live in, our feelings about what we do. Nor should we. What we should do is be explicit about our motivations, describe the thoughts and feelings we have when we do research, make it clear why we do the research or practice in the first place. We need to look at all the messy, emotional, value-laden, goal-oriented ideas and embed those within our science. Be honest. Say where we're coming from. Let me say it one more time: This does not make us bad scientists. We can still have controlled experiments where they are appropriate, but we also must always remember that we participate in that which we study. We change what we study by studying it, whether through direct, physical interactions on gross or subtle levels or simply in the way we conceptualize and talk about it, the way we compartmentalize things: this is a restorative environment, that is not; this is natural, that is urban; this is human, that is other (whether more- or less-than-human). We are all part of this big, messy, organic whole, and ecopsychology is—must be—a big, messy, organic science.

Although many perceive this to be a bias, I think this is science at its best. It is about stating your initial assumptions, your working hypotheses, including the way you might be affecting the system you are studying. We are part of that system. We are not, cannot be, separate. If we have not taken that on board, then perhaps there is no future for *eco*psychology after all.

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