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What is socio-ecological psychology?

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Socio-ecological psychology is the scientific study of how socio-ecological environments and the mind, emotion, and behaviour make each other up (see Oishi, 2014; Oishi & Graham, 2010; Uskul & Oishi, 2018 for details). The basic assumptions are that our thinking, feeling, and behaviours are influenced by our ecologies, and that our ecologies are shaped in part by our thinking, feeling, and behaviours. There are many lines of research within psychology that held the same assumptions. For instance, Kurt Lewin's (1939) field theory is explicitly social ecological in that he conceptualized that human psychology could not be understood separately from immediate, intermediate, and distal environments. Given that Lewin is widely considered a founding father of social psychology today, one might ask how socio-ecological psychology is different from social psychology. The difference is that the contemporary social psychology practiced in North America is a largely laboratory- and, experiment-based science that examines the effect of micro-environments such as priming (the thought that immediately preceded), moods, and framing. Similarly, socio-ecological psychology is similar to Ulrich Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological approach to human development. Likewise, it is similar to Gibson's (1979) affordance theory of perception (see Oishi & Graham, 2010 for the historical precedence of socio-ecological psychology, including community psychology and environmental psychology). As seen in the collection of articles in this special issue, socio-ecological psychology covers all these traditions in multiple areas within psychology and integrates them into a coherent inquiry. Socio-ecological psychology unites all the macro-oriented psychology in a sharp contrast to the mainstream, micro-oriented psychology.

There are two mainstream lines of psychology that examine macro level questions. The first cousin of socio-ecological psychology is cultural psychology. Cultural psychology is popularly defined as how culture and psyche make each other up (Shweder, 1991; Cohen & Kitayama, 2019). Whereas culture is concerned with often implicit entities such as social

norms and values, socio-ecological psychology is concerned with explicit macro entities such as climate, population density, and residential mobility. The second cousin of socio-ecological psychology is evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology is often defined as a theoretical lens that views the mind and behaviours as psychological adaptations designed to solve problems related to survival and reproduction (Buss, 2004). It is similar to socio-ecological psychology in that both pay attention to distal factors. It is different in that evolutionary psychology tends to focus on long-term adaptations in terms of survival and reproduction, whereas socio-ecological psychology tends to focus on short-term adaptations to environments not necessarily directly related to survival and reproduction.

In order to understand what socio-ecological psychology is, it is imperative to understand what we mean by social ecology. Social ecology encompasses physical, political, economic, educational, demographic, and interpersonal environments. In this special issue, we bring together most recent evidence demonstrating that all of these environments have important psychological consequences. In the first section, ten articles cover different aspects of our physical environment, including its natural (e.g., green spaces) and human-made (e.g., urban settings) components, and changing features (e.g., air pollution, global climate change). In the first group of articles in this section, contributions review consequences of exposure to nature for social connection with others and solidarity (**Goldy** and **Piff**) and to urbanization (**Linnell** and **Caparos)** and built environment (**Reichert et al.**) for information processing and mental well-being, respectively. The next group of articles demonstrates that harsh environmental conditions and threats such as disease exposure (**Schaller**), air pollution (**Lu**), global climate change (**Palinkas** and **Wong**), natural disasters (**Kaniasty**), and presence of ecological stressors such as frontier topographies and harsh climate (**Conway III et al.**) create direct and indirect consequences for psychological (e.g., mental health, disgust response, political ideology), interpersonal (e.g., social support, crime) and economic (e.g.,

productivity) aspects of our lives. Finally, **Van de Vliert** and **van Lange** focus on latitudinal gradients as descriptive and explanatory tools and review theoretical models that use this measure to explain culturally shared mindsets and practices.

The second section covers contributions focusing on political and economic environments, including forms of political and economic institutions, economic conditions, and economic activities that dominate production. This section starts with three pieces that focus on the political environment. **Badaan et al.** discuss system-justifying belief systems in the context of unequal and sectarian political environment, focusing on the example of Lebanon. **Cohen** and **Shin** examine the role of institutions in the attitude-behaviour link and how they can sometimes inverting the expected consequences. They do this by focusing on the example of pro-creditor institutions in Protestant cultures and the consequences thereof for debt behavior. In a related vein, **Trawalter et al.** focus on the role of institutions in racism, describing examples from health-care and police use of force, moving away attention from racism as an individual-level bias as typically studied in psychological science. **Rentfrow** reviews research on variation in personality across nations, regions, and cities and **Jokela** discusses neighbourhood effects on psychological distress of individuals. Next, three articles review the role of economic conditions and social class in important biological, interpersonal, and intergroup level outcomes. **Megelkoch** and **Hill** review long-lasting negative consequences of growing up in conditions characterized by socioeconomic disadvantage for health and longevity. **Bianchi** discusses how economic recessions impact on how we perceive ourselves and our relationships with others (e.g., declining individualism) and b) how it can fuel racial tensions. **Manstead et al.** highlight the importance of differentiating between different dimensions of social class and situating those within local ecologies (e.g., national, regional) to assess their impact on outcomes such as educational inequalities and political attitudes. Finally, two contributions review differences in social and

cognitive consequences that result from engaging in specific economic activities and how these differences develop. **Talhelm** reviews the recent literature on how rice (vs. wheat) farming (which requires collaborative activity) results in higher levels of social and cognitive interdependence. Complementing this review, **Uchida et al.** take a cultural transmission approach and ask how ways of being and thinking are shared in communities dominated by different economic activities.

The third section of the special issue hosts contributions on how demographic and interpersonal environments shape human psychology. Two pieces report recent research on residential (**Choi** and **Oishi**) and relational mobility (**Yuki** and **Schug**), where the focus is on the self-related, interpersonal, and cognitive consequences of people moving from one place to another in the former and the freedom and opportunities afforded by a society for individuals choosing and replacing interpersonal relationships as they wish in the latter. Two pieces discuss socioecological (**Purdie-Greenaway** and **Turetsky**) and cultural (**Verkuyten** and **Yogeeswaran**) diversity focusing not only on the effects of the distribution of social and cultural groups within a particular environment, but also how acknowledgment and acceptance of diversity is communicated through cues embedded in the environment and national policies. **Ramirez-Esparza et al.** discuss bilingualism as a consequence of globalization and how it is affected by features of interpersonal environments, as well as how positive outcomes associated with bilingualism in turn shape interpersonal environments and the society at large. Finally, **Twenge** examines psychological consequences of our embeddedness in a technological environment and **Sng and Ackerman** focus on the psychological effects of population density and sex ratio.

In order to understand socio-ecological psychology, it is also important to understand the person-environment and culture-environment interaction. For instance, an infant's ability to sit and walk changes their perception (**Franchak**), as an adult's energy levels change their

distance perception (**Witt**). Likewise, certain ecological conditions are more likely to produce a culture of honor (**Uskul** and **Cross**). Social structural changes such as urbanization and nuclear family affect the increase or decrease in individualism and collectivism (**Hamamura**). Finally, two articles in this special issue highlight that constructs that are typically construed as individual difference variables such as wisdom (**Grossmann**) and egalitarianism (**Sheehey-Skeffington** and **Thomsen**) could have socio-ecological origins as well.

Contributions do not stop at directing our attention to how different aspects of our social ecology shape our psychology, but also provide evidence for *how* the two are linked. For example, **Goldy** and **Piff** refer to feelings of awe and perceptions of beauty as two psychological processes that account for the effects of nature on human sociality. **Conway III** and colleagues point to threat and relational mobility as two mechanisms underlying the effect of ecologies on political ideology. **Bianchi** reviews research on the psychological mechanisms (e.g., uncertainty) through which economic turmoil can shape these outcomes. **Choi** and **Oishi** summarize some of the psychological processes associated with residential mobility, such as anticipated loneliness, which in turn induces motivation to expand one's social networks. **Mengelkoch** and **Hill** provide an overview of research on the biological mechanisms through which growing up in socioeconomically adverse environments can be associated with poor health in adult years. **Rentfrow** discusses selective migration, social influence, and ecological influence as the pathways responsible for geographical variation in personality. Moreover, the articles introduce the reader other subfields of psychology that are related to socio-ecological psychology (**Rentfrow**: geographical psychology, **Schaller**: evolutionary psychology) and highlight similarities and differences. It should be noted that some of the most influential lines of research in socio-ecological psychology such as Michele Gelfand's theory of tightness-looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011), Toshio Yamagishi's social

niche construction theory (Yamagishi & Hashimoto, 2016), and Patricia Greenfield's (2009) social change theory of human development are missing from the current issue simply because they were featured in the April 2016 special issue of *Current Opinion in Psychology*.

Contributions in this special issue make us pause and think how pressing questions of our times such as environmental decline that comes with increasing urbanization, climate change and decreased exposure to nature will continue impacting our mental health, connection with others and political ideologies. Similarly, they direct our attention to consequences of other modern-time developments such as increasing demographic diversity, globalization, and time spent using social media. Collectively, the articles also foster interdisciplinary thinking and strengthen bridges between psychology and other disciplines such as demography, evolutionary science, economics, and epidemiology. Finally, these articles showcase that, due to the nature of the questions asked in socio-ecological psychology, research in this field increasingly engages with methodological approaches outside of the comfort zone of conventional psychological science, analysing big-data, and adopting multi-level approaches and methodological eclecticism. Our hope is that this issue stimulates future research that continues to situate the individual within their larger environment and to examine how different aspects of this environment shapes and is shaped by human mind and behaviour.

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