

Reviewing ecopsychology research: exploring five databases and considering the future

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**Reviewing Ecopsychology: a brief snapshot of the academic literature
and original research data**

(Running Head: Ecopsychology: literature & research data)

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Abstract

This brief paper aims to provide an overview of the current penetration of the term ecopsychology in the academic literature. It summarises 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 an 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, lengthier search for articles which report original research data directly associated with ecopsychology is 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 and, if possible, to look forward and guess at the possibilities and challenges it will face. Coming to know this journal I was pleased to note the editors' intention to include a research section within it. Providing a clearly defined space where those interested in ecopsychology can present their research results will hopefully encourage the publication of pre-existing data as well as stimulating the design, collection and dissemination of new research.

In advance of this, this brief paper seeks to pause, draw a line, and review what has come before. It will supply an overview of 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, named academic databases.
2. Highlight those papers meeting the first criteria, which also appear in peer reviewed academic journals and present original data findings.

Search Methodology

Searches were conducted on the 25th of November 2008. The only term entered into databases / indexes with was ecopsychology. It is acknowledged that derivations of this term along with other related terms (e.g. ecological psychology, ecotherapy, environmental psychology, wilderness experience) could have been used to expand the search and establish other relevant literature. However, in this instance, only the term ecopsychology was entered to examine the penetration of the term itself.

Databases searched

Five databases / indexes were searched, namely: 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 over 180 scientific journals. The International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) is a bibliography for social science 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 search engine for the MEDLINE database run by the United States National Library of Medicine, the core subjects are medicine, nursing and other allied health disciplines. Finally, the Web of Science acts 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.

Aim 1: A snapshot of the term ecopsychology

Table 1: Number of hits for ecopsychology within the five databases

Databases searched (alphabetical order)	Hits for ecopsychology
BioMed Central (BMC)	0
International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)	26*
PsycINFO	89
PubMed	0
Web of Science	26*
Total Hits	141 (125 excluding copies)

* not the same 26 hits.

Table 1 shows the results of searching the five databases for the term ecopsychology. 141 results were found, which was reduced to 125 when repeated hits are taken into account. Table 2 (below) is included by way of comparison. It shows the relative number of hits for related terms (ecological psychology, ecotherapy, environmental psychology and wilderness experience). The results from the second table indicate that three of the four terms produce significantly more hits than ecopsychology, with only ecotherapy resulting in less. Although environmental psychology resulted in more than ten 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 research currently takes place in this and other areas than within ecopsychology itself.

Table 2 Comparative hits for related terms

		Databases Searched					Totals
		BMC	IBSS	PsycINFO	PubMed	Web of Science	
Term used	(number of hits)						
	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
<i>Ecopsychology</i>	0	26	89	0	26	141	

Table 3: Further breakdown of the results for ecopsychology

Type of Hit	Number	Percentage
Book / Edited Book / Book Chapter	16	13
Book Review	8*	6
Conference Paper	3	2
Dissertation Abstract**	31	25
Journal Article	66	53
Reference Entry	1***	1
Total	125	100

*including one video review. This does not include all book reviews, some are included within journals (see table 4).

**these are examples of original research that have been completed as part of a graduate / postgraduate degrees, particularly Ph.D's. 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.

***authored entry in encyclopaedia.

Table 3 illustrates a further breakdown of the results from table 1. Specifically, it clarifies the make-up of the 125 hits from the five academic databases / indexes. Of most interest to this paper is the 53% which come from journal articles. Before these are analysed further, it is worth briefly highlighting other aspects of the table.

Books, parts of books or reviews of the same make up around a fifth of the total number of hits. By far the most popular three books that came under review were: 'The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology' by Theodore Roszak (Roszak 1992), 'Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind' edited by Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner (Roszak, Gomes et al. 1995) and 'Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life' by Andy Fisher (Fisher 2002).

A quarter of the hits are dissertation abstracts. Although it is reassuring that this work is being done, it is hoped that this work is also being submitted for publication and then showing up under the journal article heading. Unless the latter happens the content of this work is not included under the auspices of this review.

Aim 2: Highlighting the articles containing original data

Table 4: Breakdown of the journal articles concerning ecopsychology

Type of Hit	Number	Percentage
Book Review	8*	12
Data	2	3
Not new data	49	74
Not written in English	5	8
Interview	2	3
Total	66	100

* included in the "journal article" total in table 3.

Table 4 further breaks down content of the articles published within journals within the five databases searched. 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. Alternative magazine or Psychology today).

Table 5: Most popular outlets for work associated with ecopsychology

Title	Number of Articles	All in the Same Issue?	Articles Since 2000?	Journals Current Publisher / URL
Alternatives	2	Yes	No	http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/
Gestalt Journal	2	Yes	No	http://www.gestalt.org/
Gestalt Review	3	Yes	No	Gestalt International Study Center
Journal of Constructivist Psychology	2	Yes	No	Routledge
Journal of Environmental Psychology	2	No	No	Elsevier
Journal of Humanistic Psychology	3	No	Yes	The Association for Humanistic Psychology
Journal of Phenomenological Psychology	2	No	Yes	Brill (http://www.brill.nl/)
Psychoanalytic Dialogues	2	Yes	Yes	Routledge
The Humanistic Psychologist	16	No*	Yes	Routledge

*12 of 16 articles within one issue

Table 5 highlights the most popular journals containing 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.

Whilst focusing on the temporal nature of these works it is worth reviewing the dates of articles uncovered. A limited number of hits (5) were returned between the years 1979 and 1989. All of these articles were either published in the German language journal (4) or an English language journal focusing on developments in another country (specifically, Mexico [1]). From the early nineties until now, yearly publication rates vary but average rates remain consistent (mean 3.6 articles per year, mode and median both 3 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 paper had hoped to highlight the data generating research that has been ascribed to ecopsychology and published in peer reviewed journal outlets. However as is clear from table 4 over 70% of the journal articles that were looked uncovered were articles that did not present new research data. (The percentage of non-new-data work is actually higher if you include book reviews, interviews, etc.). Very few journal articles reviewed for this work presented new data, most were discursive and although they undoubtedly included rigorous thought and analysis they did not present new data driven research.

Only two articles met the criteria laid out at the beginning of this article to present new data within the context of a peer reviewed journal (Burns 2000; Santostefano 2008). Burns' 2000 article is a case study describing brief, couples based therapy using integrative ecopsychology and nature-guided therapy. The paper describes the work, its background and its step by step application. It is clear that novel data is being presented here that is in support of a therapeutic technique allied with ecopsychology. Santostefano (2008) argues from a position of relational psychoanalysis and attests to research and clinical cases in support of the papers proposed model. Again, a case study is used to illustrate how, in this instance, developmental interferences could result in embodied metaphors.

Many, if not all, of the other articles including data and evidence within their content to support their arguments however the inclusion of novel data with which to support and further their aims and the wider field was on the whole notably absent.

Discussion

The paper sought to provide a snapshot of the spread of the term ecopsychology and highlight the academic journal articles which presented original research data. As shown in the first part of this paper, the term itself generated in excess of 100 combined hits within five academic databases. Many of the hits concerned books or reviews of books. This is unsurprising considering that ecopsychology as a discipline associated with that term could be argued to have been founded on the basis of two books published or edited by Theodore Roszak (Roszak 1992; Roszak, Gomes et al. 1995).

Approximately half of the hits refer to the content of academic journals – although only a tiny percentage of these refer to articles which bring new data-driven research to a wider audience. One of the chief questions which arises from this is how can ecopsychology grow as a discipline with further data driven research? In parallel to this comes a question as to how ecopsychology hopes to persuade others to be interested in its work if it can not offer examples of its own data which 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 (e.g. (Roberts 1998)(Spitzform 2000)(Aylward 1999), psychodynamics / psychoanalysis and phenomenology. Other areas which were paired with ecopsychology included Christianity, neuropsychology, population growth and social work. It is interesting that the ecopsychology literature often sees people from these other areas making parallels with ecopsychology. What appears to be happening less is authors from within ecopsychology developing and further expanding the area from within itself. 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,

written by a small number of people. Theodore Roszak, for example, is a professor emeritus of history with interests in a large number of areas. His most recent work concerned American neoconservative foreign and domestic policy since the World Trade Centre attacks on September 11th 2001 (Roszak, 2006). Andy Fisher, who wrote *Radical Ecopsychology*, is a psychotherapist in private practice. Again though, the question is raised, where from within its own ranks will the new directions in ecopsychology come from?

It is important to make clear that this article does not intend to disparage non data driven research. Academic work which 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 which does not also ask questions, 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, as yet, being married to the term ecopsychology. There is nothing to stop other authors later associating this work with ecopsychology but then, of course, this is not new data. Detailed examinations of the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this article, but it is possible to speculate on some possibilities. It maybe that researchers in parallel fields are not aware of ecopsychology, it may be that they are but do not think their research is relevant to ecopsychology. Alternatively, it may be that they are aware of ecopsychology and despite seeing the 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 re-stating. Ecopsychology and its adherents must be clear about its areas of interest, the scope of these areas and the historical evidence which supports these areas. Then, of course, it is necessary to define research agendas in line with these interests and the pre-existing literature and from there to actively pursue them by conducting and publishing novel research.

Limitations

As stated in the methods section, only one term, ecopsychology was used as a search term. 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 possible that some of the papers examined which were deemed not to contain any new data did in fact contain some. Initially only abstracts were examined and only where there seemed to be any question that new data might be present was a more detailed search of the paper undertaken. Due to the time consuming nature of collecting, analysing and publishing new data it would be strange for new data not to feature prominently within the abstract of any journal article, but this possibility is conceivable.

Conclusion

In his 1995 paper, writing from within Environmental Psychology, Reser noted that to many people ecopsychology is “synonymous with new age pseudo-science and the alternative environmental and therapeutic fringe” (Reser 1995). More than ten years later, in this new section of this new journal there is the possibility to move beyond these accusations.

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 which can sustain and grow this field.

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