

A Work in Progress: Growing a Counseling Psychology Program with a Focus on Environment and Sustainability

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*Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium.*

—Wendell Berry (1999)

Our university is a small one with a rich history and current life associated with the environment and sustainability. In addition to its stated mission to educate its students “to excel in their professions and to be engaged, environmentally responsible, globally conscious, life-long learners, and citizen leaders for democracy,” the university was the undergraduate home of Rachel Carson, one of the most important early environmental activists of the 20th century. In May 2008, the university received the gift of a 300+ acre farm on the outskirts of the city for use in its educational and community work. This gift planted the seeds of a strengthening of the university’s dedication to environmental and sustainability education across disciplines.

Out in the larger world, in 2008, life pulsed with stories about the persisting destructive repercussions of Hurricane Katrina for human and environmental health, the implications of climate change and severe weather events for safe food and water, and the negative effects on physical health of toxins in the environment and manufactured goods.

Alan Kazdin, then-president of the American Psychological Association (APA), promoted psychology as a discipline that should address issues critical to society and exhorted psychologists to tackle the “wicked problem” of environmental sustainability, noting that problems associated with environmental sustainability have multiple causes and require multiple solutions (Kazdin, 2009).

And during this same year, the APA’s Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change was finalizing its report outlining the need for psychology to be involved in addressing problems related to global climate change. Policy recommendations arising from the work of the task force included the following:

- Develop and distribute materials on global climate change for continuing education for psychologists.
- Develop materials to address therapy issues for practitioners that can be connected to actual, perceived, and anticipated consequences of global climate changes ranging from everyday stress and anxiety about climate change to crises resulting from natural disasters.
- Prepare psychologists to assist in community-based coping with the psychosocial consequence of global climate change.
- Encourage psychologists to understand and alter their own behaviors to reduce emissions in their personal lives as well as in their places of work. (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change [APA Task Force], 2009).

The gift of the farm, global news about climate change and environmental degradation, and the stirrings within the field of psychology came together to energize the graduate psychology faculty to create a doctoral program in counseling psychology with a special focus on the environment and sustainability, concepts that are related to but are broader than global climate change and its consequences. The creation of the program was grounded in beliefs that (1) practicing psychologists needed to become competent regarding information about the interface between psychology and environmental issues, and implications for their clients’ lives, and (2) psychology programs needed to include these topics in their education and training of future practitioners.

This article is a response to *Ecopsychology's* recent call for manuscripts related to the teaching of environmental topics in the psychology curriculum. There is ample evidence, summarized well in the APA Task Force report (2009) that global warming, climate change, and related environmental degradation have negative effects on the health and well-being of humans and nonhuman life-forms. There is also evidence that at least some of the climate change is related to human actions. I assume that readers are familiar with much of this work. What I share here is my own reflection, from the perspective of my position as director of graduate psychology programs, about the exhilarating and often confusing process of integrating what we are learning about these topics into a just-being-born doctoral counseling psychology program. I offer this as an invitation to talk further about the proposal that issues related to environment and sustainability become part of training of professional psychologists.

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road / the one less traveled by / offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.

—Rachel Carson (1962/2002)

Our program proposal was approved in October 2008, a couple of weeks following US news about the economic crisis related to faulty mortgage-lending practices. In addition, within the field of psychologist training, the gap between the number of psychology internships and the number of applicants for the internships was growing. And so, in this climate of uncertainty, our real work began. I have searched for a metaphor that describes the experience, at least for me, of building our new program, and have come to visualize the process as journeying down many different paths, moving back and forth between them, sometimes solo and more often with others. Some paths are well-trodden with many guides along the way; others are partially explored and require persistent planning and clearing and help-seeking. And some may not have yet been recognized.

The building of the doctoral program has involved at least two parallel processes. One process, perhaps the most important one for the survival of the program, has been the development of a program that is consistent with the guidelines for psychologist education and training set forth by the American Psychological Association's Commission on Accreditation (2009). Apart from our wish to include education and training related to the environment and sustainability in the program, the curriculum and activities must provide broad-

based and generalist training of psychologists and must also help our students develop a counseling psychology identity in particular. As anyone who has established a new program and prepared it for accreditation can attest, this process can be daunting; it is labor and time intensive. And the stakes are high. Fortunately, many others have completed this process before—this path is a well-trodden one, and there are many guides providing support.

Parallel to the very important process of program development toward accreditation has been the process of developing and integrating our focus on the environment and sustainability. While research about sustainability and psychology is rapidly growing, research devoted to integrating ideas about sustainability into psychological work with clients is in its emergent stage—so here we are walking down a partially explored path, trying to learn as much as we can. And knowledge about the education and training of psychologists toward this competency is sparse—a new trail to blaze, perhaps. Finally, we recognize that there are side roads to visit—environment and sustainability are concepts relevant for a number of different disciplines; deep understanding of the interface between environmental issues and psychology necessitates attention to theories, writings, and research in multiple disciplines.

Beginnings are apt to be shadowy and so it is the beginnings of the great mother life, the sea.

—Rachel Carson (1951/2003)

Our task of developing the environment and sustainability focus involved a first step of defining and clarifying meanings. We struggled, as has the larger field of psychology, with definitions related to the concepts of environment and psychology. What is environmental psychology? Ecopsychology? Conservation psychology? Where does sustainability fit in, if at all? Psychologists, even those associated with these areas of study, wrestle with these questions of definition (Doherty, 2010, p. 203). Within our faculty, each person seemed to have a slightly different perception of what we were talking about when we referred to environment and sustainability. Conversations about the terms often reflect larger questions within the field, including the tension between the desire to promote psychology as a scientific and empirically based field, on the one hand, and the desire to be open to emerging ideas, ways of thinking, and knowledge, on the other. Doherty (2010) offers the perspective of the “middle path [of] holding the creative tension between different environmental discourses, ways of knowing, and approaches to science and action” (p. 203).

Our faculty has attempted to walk this middle path in the construction of our program focus, with attempts to bring in empirical research from many areas and also to explore areas that are less well-

defined but equally important. As we talked, even in the midst of different perceptions, we reached consensus on several ideas derived from many ways of knowing: (1) recognition that individuals are nested in a multitude of environments or contexts (see Bronfenbrenner, 1981), including families, cultures, schools and work, communities, nations, the larger world; (2) understanding that the larger world includes the nonhuman natural world, both local and global; (3) acceptance that there are multidirectional influences moving between all these contexts or parts; (4) appreciation that the health and well-being of any part of the system is closely related to the health of the other parts; (5) belief that counseling psychology involves systemic work, considering all contexts, in order to promote mental, physical, and social health of individuals, families, and communities; and (6) value for the vision of doing this work in long-term respectful and sustainable ways. While these ideas, in and of themselves, are not novel, our hope has been to put them together in a unique way to bring environment and sustainability into training of psychologists.

We eventually created the phrase “sustainable health and well-being” to describe our vision for integration of environment and sustainability into counseling psychologist training.

We based our use of the term sustainable on the work of the Brundtland Commission (Brundtland, 1987) work, in which sustainability was defined as the capacity of society to meet its current needs without compromising the ecological, social and economic systems on which society will rely for meeting future needs. The concept of sustainability can be expanded beyond “society” to include parts that make up the societal systems—individuals, families, organizations, and communities. At any level, sustainability can be about health that grows from balance, reflection, long-term thinking, and thoughtful action, always considering the needs and strengths of all parts of a system.

We think about how the concept of sustainability might relate to concerns brought to psychologists by individual clients. This is an important consideration—for both individual and collective behaviors and choices are required for true sustainability. How do individuals or families live, day to day, with an eye toward sustaining health and well-being into the future? Are there personal resources that merit conservation or protection if one wishes to develop or sustain health and well-being on an individual or family level? Does living sustainably on an individual or familial basis have any impact on the larger sustainable living referred to by the Brundtland Commission? Examples of personal resources, whose use or misuse might affect well-being, include such factors as physical health, emotions and thoughts, play, relationships, work, community life, and wisdom (Doherty, 2009), and time and money.

In a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources and conflict may seem almost as obvious as the connection we see today between human rights, democracy and peace.

—Ole Danbolt Mjøs (2004)

Sustainable health and well-being—an attempt to name our response to the task force’s recommendation to integrate issues related to global climate change into psychologist practice. How do we make this real and meaningful for our students? How do we help them understand the relevance of these issues for work with clients, when there is relatively little in the traditional canon to draw on?

For answers to these questions, we have turned to another core social issue that has affected the education, training, and practice of psychologists. Our process of integrating the theme of environment and sustainability has paralleled the earlier integration of diversity and multiculturalism into psychologist education and training in a number of ways. First, while initial attempts to address issues of diversity and multiculturalism focused on offering, but not necessarily requiring, relevant coursework and/or extra-curricular activities, the profession eventually concluded that these issues were relevant for all aspects of education and training and, therefore, needed to be threaded throughout all parts of a program (Abreu, Chung, & Atkinson, 2000). So, in line with this earlier venture, we have provided a specific course focusing on concepts related to sustainability and the environment as well as to integrating the ideas into other courses and activities throughout the curriculum. We have woven readings and discussions about the issues through other courses—examining environmental justice in the multicultural class, exploring influences on environmental attitudes and behaviors and proposing ways to educate the public in the social psychology class, and thinking about social advocacy responsibilities in the ethics class.

Second, as was the case with the issues of multiculturalism and diversity (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992), education and training about the interface between psychology, sustainability, and the environment must include components of developing awareness, mastering knowledge, and building skills. In my experience of teaching the primary course about sustainable health and well-being, students eagerly read about climate change and its human causes, global warming and its effects on weather, and factors influencing how individuals and societies change; they were excited about emerging literature describing the integration of nature into treatment. But they seemed perplexed about how this might be relevant for most counseling work. Clients would not be seeking treatment to help them live more sustainable lives, would they? How practical is wilderness therapy for most clients? It didn’t seem to make sense.

What occurred to me was that we had skipped a critical step in the course—we had jumped right into knowledge and discussion of applications without first exploring the students' awareness—their own beliefs and attitudes, even their own interest in and awareness of current events in the news. Many students seemed to have no personal framework or general knowledge base from which to think about what all of this might mean for themselves, much less for working with clients. When we shifted gears to develop awareness through personal reflection and intentional study of the news, students began to draw their own connections between oil prices, the costs of transporting food thousands of miles from factories to groceries, the access to healthy foods in poor urban areas, and physical health. They began to understand how they might need to know something about “fracking” in order to work with families experiencing conflict about whether or not to lease farm land to gas companies. The students began to “get” the long-term sustainability idea—that they and their clients face decisions each day that may have implications for health and well-being in the future. And they began to see the larger global picture of interconnectedness and interdependence.

From this place of awareness, students then start to understand how the knowledge, the research about human behavior, the environment, and sustainability might be relevant for their work. And we can begin to explore how this knowledge might inform the actual counseling work, how it can become part of the assessment and counseling processes.

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work
and when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

—Wendell Berry (1985)

We have admitted three cohorts to our program and are well into the process of preparing for accreditation review. We have developed practicum placements in the region, conducted comprehensive examinations, and walked students through the internship application process. We are beginning to build the bridge from the program to the practicum sites, sharing our ideas with site supervisors so that our students might better integrate the ideas into their work in the community. We have had retreats with the students at the farm. And we of course face challenges.

We talk often about how intensely to focus on environment and sustainability. A doctoral counseling psychology curriculum is already demanding. How can these ideas be seamlessly integrated in meaningful ways? What, if anything, do we move around or give up

to help our students develop in this focus area? How do we add this to our curriculum, given finite resources? What does it mean to take on this new venture in a time of economic insecurity and limited pre-doctoral internship training opportunities?

We think about ethical issues. As psychologists, we are ethically mandated “to strive to benefit those with whom we work and to take care to do no harm,” as well as “to be respectful of the rights and dignity of all” (APA Ethics Code General Principles, American Psychological Association, 2010). These principles apply to work with colleagues and students as well as to work with clients. Similar to the process of integrating multiculturalism and diversity issues into psychologist education and training, the process of integrating sustainability and related issues sometimes presents controversies that require careful attention to these ethical principles. The political overtones of many discussions about climate change, environment, and sustainability cannot be ignored. For example, acceptance of scientific information about the environment and climate change often falls along political party lines in the United States (Dunlap & McRight, 2008; Jones, 2010). Second, people, including both faculty members and graduate students, hold varying beliefs and values about such issues as the relationship between humans and the earth, social justice, privilege, and poverty. Third, discussions about possible changes in daily living to develop habits of healthier and more sustainable living may challenge the status quo and result in uncomfortable feelings. Thus, education and training about these issues requires inclusion and examination of all perspectives, recognition that students may represent a wide range of political beliefs and values, self-reflection on the part of faculty and students alike, and openness and trust among and between faculty and students.

In addition, we talk about the reality that comprehensive understanding of what sustainable living entails and how it can be fostered may require stretching beyond one's professional comfort zone for both students and faculty. Educating ourselves about these issues means engaging with experts and information from a variety of other specialties, disciplines, and occupations—we cannot be in silos. We have multiple subspecialties within psychology that are relevant (environmental, population, and conservation psychology; health psychology; and community research and action, for example). Other disciplines outside of psychology that are contributing to discussions and research about environmental issues and sustainability include biology, biochemistry, medicine, sociology, economics, literature, fine arts, philosophy, ethics and law, and theology. As suggested by the APA Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change (2009), this very real need to learn from and with others requires us to be cognizant of and sensitive to differences between professionals in terms of language and definitions of

concepts. We will also need to recognize what unique ideas and research psychology can offer, as well as the limitations of our knowledge (APA Task Force, 2009, pp. 83–84).

As a faculty, we occasionally reflect about our initial question—how might an understanding of environment and sustainability issues be important for counseling psychologists? Where is the evidence that these issues are important for work with clients? And what should that work look like—how does the students' new understanding about environment and sustainability become embedded in interactions with clients, along with other core counseling concerns? We have occasionally wondered—was this focus even a good decision? Each day, however, brings more news that points to the interdependent relationship between humans and nature—conflicts about the Keystone XL pipeline and its potential effects on the environment, concerns about nuclear power plants and their safety, food security issues related to extreme weather events.

I am becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that, at this stage of figuring out how to put it all together, it might be normal to have more questions than answers. And we look forward to working with others who are also traveling this path. The concepts of environment and sustainability are pretty big ones—they are, after all, about the interconnectedness and interdependence of everything! Pulling the ideas down to earth level and putting them into focus in the context of a newly developing counseling psychology program is a challenging but worthy task.

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