Feel good or be happy
Distinctions between emotions and development in the environmental psychology research of wellbeing

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Introduction

Environmental psychology was born in the 1960s in the face of increasing attention to the urban challenges caused by population growth, which meant that researchers in the new field focused on people’s interactions with the built environment (Canter & Craik, 1981; Proshansky, 1976; Sommer, 1997). From the 1980s, this discipline expanded its focus to include problems of the natural environment, a tendency that increased when positive psychology made its entrance onto the scene of psychological research, including the study of the links between the physical environment and subjective wellbeing (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Corral Verdugo, 2012; Fleury-Bahi, Pol, & Navarro, 2016).

As we will show throughout this chapter, environmental psychology has assimilated these approaches with the objective of contributing to the explanation of the relationship between human and physical environments. Theories that emphasize the positive valence of this relationship have built their explanations on wellbeing, predominantly with conventional methodological designs that have reduced these psychological phenomena into cognitive and emotional variables. We believe this is because the dominant worldview in psychosocial research, which is characterized by analytical and unidirectional approaches, is also reinforced by an institutional system that recognizes a certain style of publications. It mainly assesses research activity with rapid results and, by extension, favours quick and prolific academic careers.

However, there are also alternative approaches in environmental psychology, developed under a community perspective, which combine variables in another level of integration, namely that of the social and political order. To address the link between environmental and wellbeing psychological research from a critical perspective, we first review some studies in environmental psychology which are becoming popular in order to provide some examples of research results produced from analytical and reductionist framework. Then, we discuss the basic approaches of critical psychology and community environmental psychology. Finally, using the framework of critical theory, we analyze the production of research in environmental psychology and wellbeing in order to raise some questions for reflection about psychological practice in this field.
Wellbeing and environmental psychology studies

Although well-known psychological theories are often used to study wellbeing in environmental psychology, such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) or Attention Restorative Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), a variety of different concepts have also been used as equivalents to wellbeing. These include happiness, welfare, health, satisfaction, and attention. For example, some authors have proposed that satisfaction and wellbeing are equivalent and interchangeable concepts (e.g., Brereton, Clinch, & Ferreira, 2008; Di Tella, MacCulloch, & Oswald, 2001; Veenhoven, 1997, 2004; Welsch, 2006).

Consequently, various scales have been developed to measure both satisfaction and wellbeing (see Table 36.1). Some of the most popular instruments in the study of wellbeing are the Positive and Negative Affective Schedule (PANAS: Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS: Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWS, based on the theory-guided Dimensions of Well-Being of Ryff, 1989), and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ: Goldberg & Blackwell, 1970). Nevertheless, due to the various biases involved, such as social desirability, some voices have been raised against the use of self-report instruments to measure wellbeing. Due to imprecision in the operationalization

### Table 36.1 Some scales to measure wellbeing according to different dimensions and concepts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Scales</th>
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| Satisfaction | - Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)  
- WHO Quality of Life Questionnaire (WHOQOL-Bref), Environmental wellbeing (World Health Organization, 1997)  
- Satisfaction with the Environment Scale (Davis, Le, & Coy, 2011)  
- Connectedness to Nature Scale (Mayer & Frantz, 2004)  
- Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF), Social wellbeing (Keyes, 2006) |
| Positive Mood | - Multidimensional Comfort Questionnaire (MDBF), Current mood (Steyer, Notz, Schwenkmezger, & Eid, 1997)  
- Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Children (PANAS-C), Positive Affect (Laurent et al., 1999)  
- MHC-SF, Emotional wellbeing (Keyes, 2006)  
- Emotional Wellness Scale, Affect balance (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008)  
- Subjective Happines Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)  
- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007)  
- MHC-SF, Psychological wellbeing (Keyes, 2006)  
- WHOQOL-Bref, Psychological wellbeing (World Health Organization, 1997)  
- SF-36 Health survey, emotional role-function (Bullinger Kirchberger, & Ware, 1995)  
- SF-36 Health survey, mental wellbeing (Bullinger et al., 1995)  
- Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), Positive affect (Watson et al., 1988)  
- Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE), Positive experience (Diener et al., 2010)  
- Subjective Vitality Scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997)  
- Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001) |
| Negative Mood | - PANAS-C, Negative affect (Laurent et al., 1999)  
- PANAS, Negative affect (Watson et al., 1988)  
- SPANE, Negative experience (Diener et al., 2010) |
| Health | - General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (Goldberg & Williams, 1988)  
- WHOQOL-Bref, Psychological wellbeing (World Health Organization, 1997)  
- SF-36 Health survey, vitality (Bullinger et al., 1995) |
of wellbeing, and the physiological processes involved in psychological restoration, the use of a variety of physiological indicators, such as heart rate, eye tracking, and others, has become popular. Although some authors do not agree with the reductionism that is involved in measuring wellbeing with these indicators, they agree that it is better to measure individual wellbeing empirically with these instruments than not to measure it at all (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Brereton et al., 2008).

Studies carried out in the field of environmental psychology on the relation between wellbeing and environment reflect this diversity of instruments of measurement. In addition, researchers use different wellbeing perspectives as the focus of their studies, such as health, meaning in life, and positive emotions, all of which are related to the effects of contact with nature and other environmental stimuli. For instance, wellbeing studies focused on health effects have shown that green environments are associated with better mental health from early adulthood, particularly in males (Astell-Burt, Mitchell, & Hartig, 2014). Studies carried out in built environments have shown how inhabitants of residential areas with higher noise levels (60 to 68 dB) who have access to a green area have higher scores related to wellbeing, a lower perception of noise as a problem, and lower levels of fatigue, irritability, and stress. They also report that wellbeing is linked to greater involvement in outdoor activities overall (Gidlöf-Gunnarsson & Öhrström, 2007). Other studies show positive effects on wellbeing in people who carry out their daily activities outside the home in a green area, with more perception of natural sounds (Pijanowski et al., 2011). Some of the effects of people’s place of origin (for example, whether they grew up in a rural or urban environment) on wellbeing depend on the self-perception of being able to control the environment and adaptable to changes of residence, which could be stronger in older-adult populations living in rural areas (Cerina & Fornara, 2011).

From the perspective of restoration theory, a growing body of evidence has described the positive effects of nature on wellbeing (e.g., Burns, 2005; Dasgupta, 2001; Gatersleben, 2008; R. Kaplan, 1973, 2001; R. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; S. Kaplan, 1983, 1995; S. Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Knopf, 1983; Sagar, 2007; Staats, Gatersleben, & Hartig, 1997; Wallenius, 1999). For example, Hartig, Mang, and Evans (1991) showed in a series of experiments that spending seven days on vacation in a natural desert led to higher scores of happiness and mental restoration in a group of backpackers compared with other participants who spent their vacations in an urban environment and a third group who did not leave their homes. Hartig et al. also observed that participants who took a walk in a natural environment achieved higher scores on various measures of restoration and emotional wellbeing, compared with participants who walked through an urban environment and experienced a state of relaxation.

There are also studies showing a positive effect on wellbeing in terms of restorative capacity, most of them using images as environmental stimuli. This has been observed under certain physical environmental conditions, such as the level of naturalness of peri-urban environments (Carrus et al., 2013), or the fact that viewing a scene of nature in spring results in more positive affect than a winter scene (Felsten, 2014). One explanation for this result is that, from an evolutionary or historical perspective, green spaces and clear blue sky have long been associated with health benefits and security (Thompson, 2011). Another possible interpretation is that such scenes have greater perceived potential for the restoration of attention (Felsten, 2009).

Along the same lines, environmental psychology tries to link geography and sociodemography. Brereton et al. (2008) showed a positive relation between wellbeing and certain aspects of the physical environment, such as reduced wind speed, higher summer temperature, or proximity to coastal areas. They also observed that proximity to major roads and landfills decreases the perception of wellbeing. Analogously, Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy (2007) studied the level of overall life satisfaction from the British Household Panel Survey, which included responses...
from nine thousand persons over 16 years. They noted that environmental concerns about ozone pollution were negatively related to wellbeing (measured with the GHQ), while concerns for endangered species were positively related to wellbeing. These results remained even when controlling for other variables, such as region of residence, levels of pollution, participation in outdoor leisure activities, and other variables. Therefore, these authors suggested, “the relationship between environmental awareness and wellbeing is not (only) due to the possible correlation between psychological traits and environmental awareness” (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Gowdy, 2007, p. 514).

This association between wellbeing and pollution has also been observed in longitudinal studies in the rest of Europe, concerning air pollution. Welsch (2006) used a set of panel data from happiness surveys, together with data on income and air pollution in ten European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom). He examined how self-reported wellbeing – expressed in terms of life satisfaction – varied with prosperity, environmental conditions, and the implied evaluation of changes in air pollution during a seven-year period (1990–1997). The study reported that air pollution plays a role as a predictor of inter-country and inter-temporal differences in the perception of subjective wellbeing. Additionally, concentrations of nitrogen dioxide and lead both showed statistically significant correlations with wellbeing. Those countries where concentrations of nitrogen dioxide and lead declined during the study (Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and the UK) increased their levels of positive wellbeing; conversely, Portugal, which underwent a significant increase in its levels of nitrogen dioxide during the same period, experienced the biggest negative change in wellbeing.

In the same research paradigm, other types of studies have tried to connect environmental physical dimensions and wellbeing. Nordh, Hagerhall, and Holmqvist (2010), carried out a study using eye tracking to collect participants’ evaluation of potential resting places on a set of 38 photographs of Scandinavian urban parks (photographed in summer), which had previously been classified from high to low in terms of their perceived restoration capacity. More attention was concentrated on those items located within the perimeter of the park, including banks, people, “ceilings” formed by the treetops, the “walls” formed by trunks and hedges, and soil with grass or plants. The authors suggested that the negative correlation between the level of perceived restoration of the park and pupil dilation could be explained by an inverse relationship between restoration and arousal, due to a relaxation effect produced by the restorative capacity of the park’s image.

Thus, restoration theory explains some of the most important cognitive benefits of the environment on wellbeing. However, focusing only on the physiological and cognitive effects of experiences of nature misses some of the most important mechanisms which enable these experiences to have a positive impact. For example, when wellbeing is measured in terms of relative happiness (Corral-Verdugo, Mireles-Acosta, Tapia, & Fraijo-Sing, 2011), it is observed that the mere intention to attend to sustainable behaviour influences happiness levels.

The results mentioned here illustrate how environmental studies focused on subjective and psychological wellbeing have confirmed the relation between contact with nature and positive emotions, even when wellbeing is operationalized with psychophysiological variables (e.g., Detweiler, Murphy, Myers, & Kim, 2008; Diette, Lechtzin, Haponik, Devrotes, & Rubin, 2003; Horsburgh, 1995; Nisbet, 2015; Ulrich, 1984). Merrero and Carballéria (2010), in a study conducted with 554 participants aged between 17 and 66 years old, found that a high frequency of contact with nature is related to the personality traits of extraversion and openness. These authors observed that, despite a significant positive influence of contact with nature on levels of satisfaction with life, emotional state, and leisure activities, nature has a small influence on wellbeing (as
measured by the SWLS, PANAS, and PWS) when controlling for personality traits. However, these results may vary depending on age and level of education. Participants who are older and less educated tend to spend less time on activities that bring them into contact with nature.

In the same way, Felsten (2014) observed the influence of the Big Five personality characteristics on the restorative effect of natural environments. Positive correlations were observed with the traits of openness, agreeableness, and extraversion, while negative correlations were observed with neuroticism. No interactions between personality and the kinds of landscape (either natural or unnatural) were observed.

An important conceptual distinction within this field of study is the difference between hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. The first concept is related to an affective dimension, which emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure (Diener, 1984); it tries to answer the question, “What can I take from the world to be happy?” Eudaimonic wellbeing, in contrast, focuses on developing human potential, giving meaning and direction to life through the promotion of personal strengths and virtues (e.g., Ryff, 1989; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). This kind of wellbeing tries to answer the question, “What can I offer to the world?” Although emotions play an important role in the construction of the self (e.g., Church et al., 2014), this was not the sense addressed in most investigations on restoration theory, where it was limited to assessing the positive-negative emotions. Hedonic experiences seem to be more frequently studied (Henderson, Knight, & Richardson, 2013); however, the eudaimonic dimension of wellbeing is most closely linked to the development of positive and complex identities (Ryff & Singer, 2013), and complex constructions of the self are linked with subjective connections with nature (Arnoicky, Stroink, & DeCicco, 2007; Clayton, 2012; DeCicco & Stroink, 2007; Leary, Tipsord, & Tate, 2008; F. J. Olivos, Olivos, & Browne, 2017; P. Olivos & Aragonés, 2014).

Studies show that experiences with nature evoke childhood memories, possibly related to the early stages of socialization (Mena, Olivos, Navarro, Loureiro, & De Jesús, 2017; Schroeder, 2007; Thomashow, 1995). Hinds and Sparks (2011) observed that people who lived their childhood in a rural environment and who have acquired great experience in outdoor activities, are more aware, and show more positive emotions (eudaimonia) and fewer negative emotions (apprehension, anxiety) when asked to imagine their emotions in a natural environment. Environments that elicited high eudaimonia and low apprehension were mainly rivers and beaches; other environmental elements that scored high on both kinds of emotions were mountains, trees, forests, and valleys, while gardens and parks scored low on both emotions. Conversely, hills and crop fields have low levels of eudaimonia and have high levels of apprehension.

Approaches from critical theory for research in environmental psychology

In this section, we try to develop an analysis of the virtue and sufficiency of the basic assumptions of wellbeing studies in environmental psychology, in light of specificities of local contexts, as well as intervention practices in community environmental psychology. The professionals who were trained in the last decades of the twentieth century were given values and tools to intervene in the community which have become obsolete in the face of the current reality characterized by inequality, conflict, and social struggle. Hegemonic ideas about concepts like “community,” “welfare state,” and “democracy,” which for decades encouraged a “civilizing” ideal – purportedly “altruistic” and “effective” – are broadly discussed in theoretical and practical terms today (Bengoa, 1996, 2006, 2009). From research groups to municipal assemblies, there is a shared zeitgeist marked by the question of how to organize the sense of our social reality and our place in it.
Academic ways to address these questions and social transformations range from a relapse into any of the various forms of scientistic fundamentalism to the adoption of radical critical positions. Those extreme positions are leaving the academy to join the ranks of the institutional state, political parties, or grass-roots social movements. However, in order for some academic practices to serve the wellbeing of society in a broad sense, it is important to redirect our critical analysis away from the objects we study and into the ways of our thinking (theory) as well as the margins of our feasible interventions (practices). As Kuhn (1962) pointed out, this path of redirecting our critical analysis from our objects of study leads to tension, discussion, and the transformation of paradigmatic visions, which nourish and sustain our scientific exercises.

In the field of psychology, Montero (2001) provided an exercise of critical reflection on the fundamental value of scientific practice, aiming to look beyond the ontologies, political interests, epistemes, methods, ethical frameworks, and conditions which we used to carry out our praxis. Since then, this path has been extended in different ways and by various authors (Díaz & González-Rey, 2012; Dorna, 2004; Ovejero, 2011; Parker, 2007; Prilleltensky, 2001, 2003). To contribute to the redirection of critical analysis, it is useful to go beyond the idea of “paradigmatic structure,” using two aspects of our practice: first, the analytical reflexive categories that allow us to reconsider the contents and meanings with which we articulate our scientific worldview; and second, our choices of these reflexive categories, which allow investigators to be questioned about their perspectives (perception, knowledge, experience) by the “others” with (and upon) whom they interact. The success of this reflection, and the incidence of choices in reproduction, resistance, or transformation of the social world where the “other” inhabits, lives, and dies, could revitalize the dialogue between universities and civil society, and the sense of responsibility implied in professional practice (e.g., Ernst, 2009, 2013; P. Olivos, 2005; P. Olivos & Pedroni, 2005).

If the historical interest of the vision and scientific practice is recognized and the position of the “subject of knowledge” is restored to the lay members of the community (Dussel, 1989), then the dialogue between academy and community could aspire to be frank and to transform our reality. It begins with the discussion of our ways of seeing the world (ontology), our ideals about social goods (ethics), and our strategies for keeping as close as possible to those righteous horizons (policy). From there, we start to build the mutual recognition needed to enable wider spaces of dialogue and cooperation. Only after taking these steps, in that logical order, will we have sufficient evidence to engage in true collective discussions, seeking agreements on what constitutes useful knowledge (epistemology) and the most appropriate procedures and techniques for building that knowledge (methodology).

If we were to try to apply this analytic proposal into the dominant paradigms within environmental psychology production (namely, research and intervention), we should start by asking some questions. First, what are the main ideas through which we conceive the environment, nature, society, and individuals? What or who composes them? What interacts (and how) with them? Second, how are these objects/subjects conceived from our particular theoretical frameworks? Finally, how do the ways of conceiving such objects/subjects contribute to reproduce, resist, or change the order of things in the imagined objects/subjects (community and/or environment)?

The epistemological and methodological considerations that underlie our professional practices are not fixed or immobile realities. They are the socially constructed results of the questioning process described earlier, and should not be imposed on the communities that are the object of our work. This approach would develop a dialogue that feeds on the multiple knowledges available as a product of the encounters between “experts” and “laypeople.”

From a symbolic vantage point constructed and shared between both academia and community, it is possible to rethink and reformulate an extensive part of our social theory and practice.
The experiences of community environmental psychology provide an opportunity to achieve this change, as a specialized and viable theoretical – practical alternative, in contrast to the complete self-absorption that sometimes dominates large segments of theory and practice, in social psychology in particular (Ibáñez, 1997), as well as the social sciences, environmental interventions, and political decisions in general (Welp & Stoll-Kleemann, 2006).

In the next section, we review the critical perspectives that underlie the epistemological and methodological assumptions of community environmental psychology research. The definition of object and methodological choices from this perspective provides a number of alternatives for scientific production, the description of socio-environmental phenomena, and the potential emancipatory role of knowledge in the target communities.

Critical perspectives in community environmental psychology

In the beginning, critical approaches in environmental psychology had to overcome the limitations imposed by the prevailing political approaches to environmental and institutional issues, as well as concerns about citizen participation. These limitations posed problems for practices and explanations based on theories of behaviourism and materialism, because they were perfectly in tune with the spirit of their time. Perussia (1983) described these kinds of conceptual and methodological limitations and prejudices in an Italian context. In fact, it is likely that those negative conditions would have encouraged community environmental psychology in its further development.

Environmental psychology has developed an implicit critical perspective on the study of the physical environment, thanks to research focused on the occupation of urban space from a practical point of view. As we mentioned above, the definition of environmental psychology as an applied social psychology has had important effects on the conception of its subject of study, the role of the researchers, and their methods (Castro, 2006; Íñiguez & Vivas, 1997; Steg & Gifford, 2008; Stewart, 2000; Stokowski, 2002; Wiesenfeld, Sánchez, & Cronick, 2003). This approach to the study of the socio-environmental subjects has required the development of new methods, supported by constructivist epistemologies focused on qualitative approaches, seeking descriptions of biographical accounts through the analysis of narratives collected with methods associated with ethnography (Cabruja, Íñiguez, & Vázquez, 2000; Morehouse, 2008; Sánchez & Wiesenfeld, 2002; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). In this direction, some authors have proposed the use of mixed methods, integrating qualitative analysis with graphical and quantitative data analysis (Berroeta & Vidal, 2012), or the combination of critical qualitative research with Barker’s behavioural observation surveys (Georgiou & Carspecken, 2002). The focus of community approaches was redirected from action research to other psychosocial subjects, which are defined from different variables, expressed in different levels of emergence, and compared with those usually studied in environmental psychology in order to analyze the relationship between wellbeing and environment. There are many studies highlighting the agency of the inhabitants of a given territory (i.e., their strength, organization, and capacity) to change their own wellbeing by reinforcing their sense of community and their collective political role into the environment, not only through positive emotions but also through quality of life (García, Giuliani, & Wiesenfeld, 1999; Grau-Solés, Íñiguez-Rueda, & Subirats, 2012; Íñiguez-Rueda, Martínez, Muñoz-Justicia, Peñaranda-Cólera, & Vitores, 2012; Rozas, 1998; Stokowski, 2002).

Studies aimed at achieving a dense description of the human phenomenon of inhabiting a physical space have highlighted the idea of sense of place (Berroeta, 2009; Berroeta & Muñoz, 2013; Cabruja et al., 2000; Savransky, 2012). These studies describe the demands for the construction of social identities related to territory and the transactions made to satisfy these
demands in the economic and cultural market. As Bachelard (1957) discussed in his reflections on the phenomenological study of living spaces, imagination increases the value (price) of reality, particularly in the case of housing. The development of the study of the phenomenon of place identity has been an important part of the environmental psychology (Falk & Balatti, 2004; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Lewicka, 2011; Pol, Moreno, Guàrdia, & Íñiguez, 2002; Vidal, Berroeta, di Masso, Valera, & Peró, 2013). More recently, further studies have investigated the contents of identification processes related to nature (Clayton, 2012; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; P. Olivos & Aragonés, 2014; P. Olivos & Clayton, 2017).

Studies of quality of life are not the exclusive privilege of the community approach. The conventional approach to wellbeing, in terms of physical health, has also been employed to study the quality of life in cities. For example, Korpela and Ylén (2007) studied the responses of more than two hundred participants to a questionnaire on perceived health, and their preferences for visiting places in residential areas. Participants who reported certain health problems such as head, chest, and stomach pains, and fainting or light-headedness, were more likely to select natural places as their favourite sites, compared with those who reported few health complaints. These participants felt more benefits in emotional terms, experiencing positive feelings in their preferred natural and relaxing places.

Similarly, Pryor, Townsend, Maller, and Field (2006) observed positive results with participants undergoing addiction treatment. In a study-intervention case, seven women between 17 and 24 years, with different psychological and social addictions, participated in a 12-day program of outdoor experience in a natural desert environment in Australia, known as “bush adventure therapy.” Despite the limitations of these types of studies (small groups, absence of control groups, extensive covariance, etc.), the authors suggested that social environment, physical challenges, and contact with nature were key factors in increasing physical and mental health and wellbeing in participants. The experience as a whole, and particularly the use of their abilities to solve problems in a new environment, provided participants with opportunities for learning and discovering new abilities. They reported a positive impact on their identities and a sense of control over their experiences. They formed attachment relationships with others participants, and described experiences of connection, belonging, resilience, and personal security. There were also reductions in some symptoms of mental disorders. The natural environment facilitated revelations, as “insights” to vital aspects of their biographies, often through metaphors.

Unfortunately, only a few studies in environmental psychology have explicitly addressed the critical analysis of environmental problems, which is found more frequently in sociology (e.g., Brulle, 2000; King & McCarthy, 2005; Wehling, 2002) and anthropology (e.g., Aliste & Urquiza, 2010; Casagrande et al., 2007; Ingold, 2000; Milton, 2013). In one such study, Kondrat (2002) criticized the ecosystem perspective, which separates society and environment, offering a view from the critical theory approach, which emphasizes the bidirectional effects of the actions of human beings and changes in the environment. As we noted earlier, the author highlighted that while human behaviour is shaped by society and its structures, such structures are constructed, maintained, and recursively reproduced by the social actions of human agents over time.

**Discussion and reflection in environmental psychology for wellbeing**

An ontological discussion about the subjects of study and intervention must involve the construction of a different relationship between the object and professional practice. It begins with the problematization of the validity principle, in which we blindly trust our research methods without reflection. In this sense, the discussion within environmental psychology of the
concepts of environment and nature is more relevant today than ever. This is necessary not only because of the unanswered questions about the relationship between human beings and the environment, but also by the sociocultural construction of the subject and our interactions with it, in everyday life as well as in scientific and professional practice.7

In the structure of psychological dynamics, emotions are to wellbeing as economy is to sustainability. In other words, despite the importance of studying emotional processes that underlie wellbeing, these are only one dimension of a wider and more complex phenomenon. For this reason, it is necessary to undertake a deep investigation of the adaptive sense of environmentally related emotions – both positive and negative – in terms of their cultural meaning (P. Olivos & Clayton, 2017). This requires going beyond mechanistic and analytical reduction in order to study the relationship between wellbeing and the environment. Some studies in environmental psychology have examined the process of social construction of relations with the environment, such as the anthropomorphic attribution that shapes perceptions of justice (e.g., Opotow, 1993), empathy (e.g., Sevillano, Aragonés, & Schultz, 2007), or conservation behaviours (e.g., Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013). However, there is a lack of deep discussion about the “ethical” sense of these processes in terms of wellbeing, which involve cultural studies of society, the sense of emotions in those imaginary scenarios and expectations, and the role of researchers/professionals in the (re)production of knowledge produced and developed from their work.

The social sciences can respond to this challenge with methodological designs that incorporate the subject/object as part of the interpretation of their descriptions and explanations. The scientific aspirations of objectivity (Maturana, 1997) and generalization (Horkheimer, 2000) should build their principles of validity and reliability according to meaningful descriptions and explanations for and within communities of interest for social psychologies. For example, the distinction of first, second, and third orders of analysis levels, proposed by Geertz (1973), could help the field to develop appropriate methodological devices, in terms of research designs and tools, that are able to provide meaningful explanations (e.g., P. Olivos, 2001). Moreover, the empirical contrast designs could be carried out in accordance with the principles of action research advocated by Lewin (1946), taking into account that samples should not only be valued for their size, statistics for their significance or effect sizes, or algorithms by their fashionability. Environmental psychologists can promote this research framework to develop comprehensive, professional responses to local ecological impacts related to global environmental problems (Stokols, 2006; Stokols, Misra, Runnerstrom, & Hipp, 2009), especially taking into account the impact that immediate social networks have on the evaluation of personal subjective well-being. A recent study was conducted with more than two thousand participants who answered a life satisfaction scale, as a measurement of subjective wellbeing (F. J. Olivos et al., 2017). It showed that downward social comparison, with the worst reference group, produces an increase in individual perception of life satisfaction; meanwhile, upward comparison produces a decrease in the same perception.

With regard to the “political” issue, discussions are focused on the emancipatory (or not) role of knowledge and experience in the communities with which the psychologist works. First, the relations established between professional enlightened knowledge, “intellectuals”, and the repositories of popular wisdom, “laymen”, have changed and become more complex over time. In the nineteenth century, professionals went from being regarded as oracles of laypeople to teachers of them. In the twentieth century, we have seen a similar trend, but this time the transition was from that of a spokesperson to that of a companion, with professionals building horizontal and collaborative relationships with different actors from the laymen’s world, with a commitment to humility and wisdom (Ernst, 2013). These changes have brought about the “emancipated – emancipatory” style of production of knowledge.
This interconnection of knowledge, known as “new deal,” reflects much more than just a generational change. It has also been the key factor for opening the willingness of important part of the scientific “old guard” and stakeholders. The Gulbenkian Commission, at the end of the last century (Wallerstein, 1996), made a call for the “restructuring” and “opening” of the social sciences, to return to the values of internal and external criticism by examining the concepts and paradigms that do not recognize the social need for change (Walkerdine, 2002).

The interconnection of knowledge, in this new deal, must also generate new links and trust with communities. The task is not easy, because of the accumulated decades of extractive practices of knowledge and pervasive alliances with the official powers (Aubry, 2007; Welp & Stoll-Kleemann, 2006), but also because of the profound changes in psychological praxis and community relationships that have been experienced in the last 50 years. For example, due to encroaching development of electronic communication technologies, the need for permanent territorial locations and a regular face-to-face contact in working among and or with members of new communities has been questioned. We have seen the emergence of expressions such as “virtual community” (Krause, 2001), “personalized learning environments” (P. Olivos, Segovia, Honrubia, & Gómez, 2013), or “self-organised learning environments” (Mitra & Dangwal, 2010).

Despite the discrepancies that constructivist approaches have produced (Montero, 2004), the tension that exists between the “logic of relationship” and “logic of connection” must be recognized (Bauman, 2003). These technological changes call into question our conventional conceptions of affections, democracy or learning. Something similar is also happening in the physical world, where recent migration processes due to war or instability of the labour market (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2013; Cuenca et al., 2014) also pose new scenarios for the psychological processes studied by environmental psychology, in which the definition of identity is linked to place.

According to the Chilean anthropologist, José Bengoa, contemporary communities are trapped in one of three different situations. First, as a “lost community” (1996), based on a nostalgic identity of the rural cultural experience from which they have come. Second, as a “fragmented community” (2009), based on an identity threatened by the pressure of modernization (without modernity), which represents the tension and potential division imposed by the new-colonization of business and technology. Finally, there is the “imagined community” (2006), based on a hopeful identity of freedom and modernity in relationships, tired of so much bondage and modernization of things. To understand how modern Western communities, like many others in their periphery today, face up to the multiple challenges for their reproduction and projection throughout time, it is necessary to know their position in their society.

The development of a greater “sense of crisis” in the population is another fact that elicits the progress of this kind of “transformative agenda.” The discrediting of politics works in favour of the recovery of political awareness or freedom of collective will (Mouffe, 2007). This scenario allows the extension of a critical attitude to government decisions in the economic and cultural fields, thus outlining a new context that attempts to impose limits on the action of interest groups who profit from the status quo.8

This critical sense, extended to the sphere of ecological consideration, leads us for the first time to rethink the ways in which we produce and consume, with the aim of ensuring our survival, not only of our communities but also of our species (Löwy, 2014). The green political agenda has found a place in the world (Clapp & Dauvergne, 2008; Goodin, 1992). “The Greens” have begun to appear as an alternative to the lukewarm and worn down “Progressives,” against the strengthening of the extreme right wing, as shown by some recent national elections in Europe.

It is vital to contribute to the articulation of the “new deal” and to abandon the disciplinary fundamentalisms imposed by the “ownership” of certain “subjects” and the “absolute truth” claimed by certain “respected fields.” This is a further aspect of what, according to Beck (1999),
is a fallacy of modernity in the form of an illusion of control in what he calls the “risk society.” It is crucial to the success of these emancipatory proposals to overcome the anachronistic view, which considers the different disciplinary fields of the social sciences as watertight tanks. Various forms of multidisciplinary output are possible: Both interdisciplinary (based on the dialogue between fields) and transdisciplinary (going beyond the limits of each field) outputs can both represent useful alternatives for environmental psychology (Stokols et al., 2009).

With regard to theories and scientific practices, it is important to ask ourselves some questions, such as “for whom do we work?”, “how are our skills and knowledge put to use?”, and, by extension, “what are the results and applications derived from them?” We can best address those questions based on the subjects discussed in the present chapter, focusing on those urgent issues for action research in environmental psychology to build a comprehensive study of wellbeing.

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Notes

1 We emphasize the expression “natural environment,” also known as “green environment,” in contrast to “built environment,” because our focus is on conservation psychology (Clayton, 2012). Researchers in this field study different topics such as sustainable design practices or “green building” (Gifford, 2014), green electricity policy (Clark, Kotchen, & Moore, 2003; Hansla, Gamble, Juliusson, & Gärling, 2008), or green identity (Whitmarsh & O’Neill, 2010), among others.

2 The term “welfare” is often used to mean a kind of social support (in the form of financial or other benefits) provided to individuals by organisations or states. However, the Cambridge English Dictionary (2016) includes another definition of “welfare,” namely “physical and mental health and happiness, especially of a person.” This definition is often confused with “wellbeing” in some documents (particularly in economy and other social sciences); hence this note. In environmental psychology, as positive psychology in general, we use “wellbeing” (or “well-being” in the United States and Canada, where two of the most important environmental psychology journals are published).

3 This is a common term in environmental psychology research (e.g., Boding & Hartig, 2003; Hartig, Kaiser, & Bowlar, 2001; Hartig & Staats, 2006; Staats & Hartig, 2004).

4 This study was carried out with data collected from 1,500 participants living in Ireland.

5 In this study the authors included several variables, such as whether or not participants worked in a garden, occupational level, education, number of working hours per week, net monthly family income, civil status (marriage or partnership), etc. A total of 17 dummy variables were tested in the structural models, but none of them were found to have positive effects on wellbeing.

6 Behaviourism laid the theoretical foundations and some of the most important practices for environmental manipulation to produce effects on human behaviour. However, we must remember that studies like those of John Watson were acclaimed by a culture that valued success, although the rules that we consider appropriate ethical guidelines for scientific research today were widely transgressed.

7 Other professionals have specialised in this kind of questions. For a deep revision of anthropological meanings of nature in human societies, see the work of Philippe Descola (1994, 2005) and Tim Ingold (1986, 2000).

8 Some commentators from history and economics have pointed out signs that they claim portend the end of capitalism (e.g., Hussey, 2014; Mason, 2015). We need to build an environmental psychology for the future, where wellbeing studies will need to be reconceptualised.

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Feel good or be happy


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Feel good or be happy


