

# Integrating Psychological Insights for Environmental Sustainability: Towards a Holistic Approach

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## ABSTRACT

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

*Environmental scientists warned that the health of the planet is increasingly deteriorating, of which the primary cause has been identified as human related behaviours. Psychology therefore can contribute immensely to understanding and shaping the behaviours that are negatively impacting on the ecosystem. However, this paper calls for increased collaboration between psychology and environmental sustainability experts to develop evidenced-based interventions that promote sustainable behaviours, integrate environmental education into psychological curricula, and foster policy changes supporting individual and collective environmental actions. This paper further subscribes to the relevance of psychology to solving environmental problems; by exploring psychological factors such as cognitive biases, social norms, counselling and emotional connections to develop more effective strategies to promote pro-environmental behaviours. Conversely, environmental sustainability efforts can inform psychological theory and practice, enhancing understanding of human well-being and the human-environment interface. This paper also maintains that integrating of psychology in environmental studies could promote the training of future conservation activists. In concluding, psychology has a critical role to play in creating a sustainable environment thus bridging the gap between psychology and environmental sustainability to promote the understanding of human behaviour and its impact on the planet, ultimately creating a more sustainable future for all.*

**KEYWORDS:** Behavioral change, Ecosystem, Conservation & Curricula Development

## Introduction

World over, environmental pollution, and depletion of the natural resource areas are reportedly as a result of direct human industrial, commercial, and private activities. The incessant and rapid cases of deforestation of the forests and desertification are not natural phenomena; rather human beings cut down trees and over develop the land (Scott & Kogger, 2005). It is noteworthy therefore, that the underlying common cause of threat to the health and wellbeing of the ecosystem is sometimes attributed to human behaviour. This, reinforces the assertion that man is the real enemy to the environment, as man's actions and inactions have caused the worst forms of environmental degradation, and ecological damages that could be linked to the palpable climate change phenomenon.

In Nigeria the narrative is the same. The Nigeria Health Watch in the 2021 WASH NORM reported that, approximately 48 million Nigerians indulge in open defecation, with a total of 104 Local Government Areas across the various states successfully had achieved open defecation-free status. While in the Niger delta region with Rivers State inclusive, the illegal activities of the artisan refining of crude oil have further degraded the ecosystem with soot on the atmosphere in Port Harcourt and its environs overtly contaminating and polluting the air thereby worsening the health and wellbeing of residents; also exacerbating the scenario, is the heating of asphalt (for road use) as well as burning of stolen petroleum products by security agencies, (Vanguards News, 2018). All of these are various forms of human activities (behaviour) that are environmentally destructive.

Naturally, animal species go extinct in their natural circle, but studies have shown that the rate at which these species now disappear from our physical environment due to pollution and expedition in their habitat is disquieting, (Scott & Kogger, 2005; Saunders, (2003). The excessive amount of greenhouse gases from daily routines of millions of people causes the global climate change, and obviously maybe threatening the very survival of both human and animal organisms alike. These phenomenal reflections clearly reveal indifference in the ways human beings behave to the environment in their quest to meet the needs and wants, hence defiling the natural resources and ecological integrity. In this connection, psychologists (experts in behavioral science) have vital and unique role to play in slowing or outright stepping down of humans' ecological destruction trajectory, and promoting sustainable alternatives through the making and integrating of psychological principles into environmental studies.

It is against this backdrop that Winter and Kogger, (2004), posited that many theoretical and empirical evidences from various subdisciplines in psychology suffice to this effort. Indeed, psychology is the essential discipline that offers understanding, why individual behaves in unsustainable ways, and for designing interventionist models, like behaviour modification and conditioning that address behavioral change at the individual level. In doing so is to integrate laudable implications of psychology on environmental sustainability programmes, at the undergraduate programs in our tertiary institutions, to connect between psychology and environmental issues.

### **Psychology: A Sustainability Science**

Hitherto, many even among the educated population do not know why psychology is termed a science, since it is not listed among the traditional sciences like physics, chemistry amongst others, which perhaps could have accounted for the deliberate action of not domesticating psychology amidst most undergraduate courses (for example in environmental sciences etc.). Since 1970s, some traditional subdisciplines of psychology (primarily behavioral, social, cognitive, and developmental) have applied basic theories of psychology to environmental issues (Cialdini,2003; Ornstein & Ehrlich, 2000; Kahn, 1997b; Geller, 1987; & McKenzie-Mohr, 2000a; 2000b). And in the 1990s, Ecopsychologists (who referred to themselves as holistic thinkers) explored how contemporary industrialized urban behaviour have begun to wear down the ecologically connected sense of self with which we are born with, thereby leaving us psychologically distressed (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995). Just recently, scholars in related psychology subdisciplines envisioned conservation psychology (CP) to encompass all the environmentally related work of psychologists. According to Saunders, cited in Kogger and Scott (2005), Conservation Psychology is defined as;

The scientific study of reciprocal relationship between humans and the rest nature, with a particular focus on how to encourage conservation of the natural world. CP is an applied field that uses psychological principles, theories, and methods to understand and solve issues related to human aspects of conservation, (p. 112)

Conservation Psychology is modelled after biology which intersects with variety of subdisciplines within psychology and each with theoretical framework and methodologies that contribute its mission, (Saunders, 2003). These conceptions emphasize the theoretical and empirical foundations of conservation psychology and if integrated into the curricula as proposed could impact on the course content of Psychology, inspiring environmentally focused courses. This will help immensely to raise more awareness even among psychology teachers about the quality of work in the discipline that is related to environmental sustainability. It is in this regard, that this paper is raising greater awareness that is ideally based to inspire faculties, schools and departments to incorporate the materials of psychology into the relative topical courses of environmental studies for sustainability. In view of the above, behaviorism in psychology, which focuses on the mechanisms of learning, and the role of experiential conditions to change a behaviour as well as maintain the consequences of that changed behaviour could apply in the instance under discourse. Skinner (1991) commented on the applicability of behaviorism in addressing environmental degradation, hence he said;

Most thoughtful people agree that the world is in a serious trouble...that many people have begun to find a recital of [the] dangers, tiresome is perhaps an even greater threat... [We must] look at our behaviour and at the environmental conditions of which it is a function. These we shall find at least some of the reasons why we do as we do, (pp 19- 20).

Relative convenience and provision of social status, comfort or pleasure serve several rewards towards environmentally destructive behaviour. Thus, it is important to restructure these conditions to foster sustainable behaviours. The imperatives of subdisciplines in psychology in environmental studies includes:

### **Social Psychology**

Social Psychologists are interested in how social roles, identities and the situations in which individuals find themselves can influence cognitions, emotions, and behaviour. According to Scott and Kogger, (2005), environmentally impacted behaviour do not happen in isolation; rather there is social influence. Specific strategies built on fundamental theory of persuasion, compliance and conformity can successfully alter someone's environmentally related behaviour. For instance, social norms such as littering of waste or open defecation in our society are affected by indication of approval of what we see others do, of which frequent attending of large action of discussion on climate change can increase proper disposal behaviour. So much of the environmental problems are as a result of the social milieu in which the actions take place, and to resolve social problems include educational programs among others.

## Health Psychology

Ecopsychologists maintain that healing of the environment and the healing of self, go hand-in-hand, just as the holistic psychology emphasizes the irreducibility of the complex human system into component parts; the ecological sustainability is based on

the interrelatedness of all earthly systems. Eventually human beings must reconcile their inseparability from larger systems of which they are part of, whether it is because of gradual increase in global temperature that will ultimately disrupt food production among others or increase in tropical diseases as a result of the direct effect of hazardous substance produced intentionally or otherwise.

Clinical psychologist understands natural and human made diseases, disasters, pollutions and their associated disorders, for example, living closer to waste dump (site), or the air and/or water polluted with sooth could produce overt anxiety and fear from the possible health effect. Consequently, the clinical psychologists have incorporated eco-psychological therapies into their practice to foster mindfulness to guide people make ecologically harmonious choices. For instance, ecological integrity containing only water or vegetations, lacking automobile or building of any sort and are not disturbed by human beings in any way should be encouraged at least for their physical and psychological benefits.

## Cognitive Psychology

Human perceptual and cognitive systems evolved in environments very different from those humans currently encounter. As a result, people tend to focus only on threats that are noticeable like the thick smoke from gas flaring, smoke emission from abattoirs, and sooth on our cars when it rains among others, rather than the largely invincible pesticides and other toxics in water or foods. By human nature, there is always the tendency to discount long term widespread threats in favour of short-term prevailing benefits, which has always put self-interest above that of the generality of the community, which is the bane of degradation and conflict in oil bearing communities in the Niger Delta. This trait is a *hard wire* which is possible to overcome through behaviour modification model to reduce interval between the short-term reward and long-term punisher, where environmentally appropriate behaviour is reinforced positively and destructive behaviour fined or sanctioned.

## Developmental Psychology

It is obvious that evolutionary process can account for the apparently instinctual attraction humans have towards natural environment even animal species alike. Environmentally responsible behaviour like recycling, caring for, and nurturing of animals can result from experience in nature, an observation that forms core biocentrism. Recently, some developmental psychologists have investigated how humans whose ancestors evolved in a natural context and found that their responses to nature were characterized with disgust and disdain as well as fear. Historically, more empirical evidences abound about individual commitment to sustainable future vis-a- vis the development of environmental concern.

## Integrating Psychology for Environmental Sustainability

Currently a few literatures do exist on environmental psychology that addresses the need to promote environmentally responsible behaviour. In other words, wealth of environmentally related psychology theories and researches are not integrated in most environmental courses to facilitate sustainability; hence to include lectures, discussion and topics about the connection between psychology and environmental issues. Areas to cover are history and

overview of systems such as psychodynamics, humanistic psychology, research methods, biological psychology, motivation and emotions, cognition, learning, individual differences, distress and wellness; environmental psychology, and ecopsychology as well as other applied environmental issues, which may include but not limited to other social dynamics and environmental history covering such courses like environmental racism, group dynamics in environmental activism, social construction of environmental problems, environmental attitudes and behaviour as well as social dilemmas. These topics will enable students to apply psychological principles to design an intervention projects, and dissertations that addresses environmentally relevant practices. It may focus on individual student's behaviours for example; paper use, energy use, recycling, and shifting towards vegetarianism. Students would be required to develop a detailed action plan based on behaviour modification, strategies and applications; which shall include six component issues, viz; (1) identification of specific environmental impact, (2) student's goals in terms of increase in behaviour that are desirable and side by side with undesired behaviour (i.e. The environmentally destructive behaviour) (3) assessment of potential obstacle and specification of plans to overcome them, (4) observation and identification of baseline behaviour, (5) antecedent and consequent stimuli, and (6) implementation of the behaviour change plan and submission of regular progress log book. Such educational program for sustainability strives to involve the learners in interrelated ways of understanding that builds from awareness to appreciation, knowledge, values, attitude, skills, and active learning. Highlight of ways to integrate psychology into environmental sustainability education;

- Environmental psychology courses: offer courses that specifically focus on the psychological aspects of environmental sustainability, such as the human-nature connection, environmental attitudes, and behaviour change
- Interdisciplinary approaches: incorporate psychology into existing environmental sustainability courses by exploring the psychological dimensions of environmental issues, such as climate change, conservation, and sustainable development.
- Behaviour change strategies: teach students about evidence-based behaviours change techniques such as goal getting, feedback, social norms, to promote sustainable behaviours.
- Emotional connections with nature: explore the role of emotions and personal experience in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours
- Social influence and community engagement: Discuss how social norms, group dynamics and community involvement can foster environmental sustainability
- Environmental justice and equity: examine the psychological impacts of environmental degradation on marginalized communities and explore strategies for promoting environmental justices
- Sustainable lifestyle and well-being: excavate the relationship between sustainable behaviour, wellbeing and quality of life
- Environmental education and communication: apply psychological principles to develop effective environmental education programmes and communication strategies
- Research and assessment: incorporate psychological research methods and assessment tools to evaluate the effective of the environmental sustainability

initiatives.

By doing so, students are empowered with environmental sustainability education; with the understanding of psychological factors driving environmental behaviours, ultimately equipping them with evidence-based strategies that promote sustainable future.

## Conclusion

In concluding, Ophuls (1977) wrote that;

The ecological crisis is in large part of perceptual crisis; ordinary human beings simply do not see that they are part of a delicate web of life that their own actions are destroying, yet any viable solution will require them to see this (p. 223)

In other words, the solution will require a shift, from the environmentally destructive behaviour which has been the primary cause of ecological damage; to adaptive, positive, proactive desirable and compactable behaviours. It is time for the human behaviour experts to start integrating from undergraduate education level psychological principles into environmentally sustainable studies as possible solutions, for future policy makings and conservation of ecosystems vide focus on human behaviour, towards the environment.

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