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# Foreground and Background: Environment as Site and Social Issue [pre-print]

Susan Opotow

Jen Jack Giesecking

*Trinity College*, [jack.giesecking@trincoll.edu](mailto:jack.giesecking@trincoll.edu)

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**Foreground and Background: Environment as Site and Social Issue**

Susan Opotow

City University of New York

John Jay College of Criminal Justice and The Graduate Center

Jen Giesecking

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Authors' notes

**Susan Opotow** is a Professor at the City University of New York at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and The Graduate Center. Her theory and research on *moral exclusion* focuses on antecedents, processes, and outcomes of seeing others as outside one's scope of justice and therefore as eligible targets of violence, exploitation, and harm. She also examines *moral inclusion*, the process of extending justice more broadly in society. She co-edited *Identity and the natural environment: The psychological significance of nature* (MIT Press, 2003) with Susan Clayton, and has written extensively on the environment. She was president of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (2008-9) and is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Secretary of the International Society of Justice Research, and Editor of *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*.

**Jen Giesecking** is a Ph.D. candidate in environmental psychology at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her dissertation research focuses on the production of lesbians' and queer women's urban spaces in New York City from 1983 to 2008 to examine these women's experiences of justice and oppression. She is also researching mental mapping

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methodologies and is a 2010-11 Alexander von Humboldt German Chancellor Fellow in Berlin where she is conducting comparative research on urban lesbian spaces.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Susan Opotow, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, 899 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Email: [sopotow@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:sopotow@jjay.cuny.edu)

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### **Abstract**

To examine how the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) has engaged with environmental issues throughout its 75 year history, we consulted five SPSSI-based data sources. Our analysis, attentive to the larger socio-political contexts over time, focuses on SPSSI's attention to the physical environment, the places in which social living and interactions occur. In SPSSI's early years, social issues research was often situated within specific locales. Since 1960 and the emergence of environmental psychology and the environmental movement, SPSSI increasing focuses on *environment* as a social issue in its own right as well part of other social issues. Over time there has been a decline in mentions of the physical environment in SPSSI's methods texts. This historical analysis highlights the *specifics of context* in SPSSI's environmental research and urges attention to the physical as well as social aspects of *environment* in research and activism.

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### **Foreground and Background: The Environment as Site and Social Issue**

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues's 2009 Strategic Plan describes the Society (SPSSI) as having emphasized peace, prejudice, poverty as well as health, legal issues, and the environment throughout its history (SPSSI Council, 2009). The 75 years since SPSSI's founding in 1936 have seen enormous environmental change. Midway through this period, about the time of the first Earth Day in 1970, there was an awakening of environmental awareness internationally in laws, policies, and public action (Dunlap & Catton, 1979). This paper examines SPSSI's attention to environment alongside societal events during SPSSI's history to consider how the Society has addressed *environment* in the past, at present, and what next steps for SPSSI might be.

Because *environment* is the context within which all social relations occur, it has been a central construct in social psychology from its beginning (James, 1890; Dewey, 1937). Gestalt psychologists attended to environment as it was experienced perceptually (Ash, 1998; see also Koffka, 1967; Köhler, 1959, Wertheimer, 2000). Kurt Lewin, who worked with Gestalt psychologists Köhler, Koffka, and Wertheimer on questions of perception and context, sought to bring his research to bear on contemporary problems (Ash, 1998). Lewin's (1943a) fundamental principle of social psychology research proposes that human behavior is a function of the person and the environment, abbreviated as  $B = f(P \times E)$ . This theorem has stimulated a large body of research on life space and the person-environment fit in such everyday contexts as neighborhoods, schools, and the workplace (Caplan, 1983; Deutsch, 1968; French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974). Lewin was especially interested in public spaces as sites of commitment, such as his research on homemakers' food choices during World War II (Lewin, 1943b). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) elaborated on Lewin's work in Ecological Systems Theory which argues

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that individuals, situated in specific and interdependent ecological systems, carry particular capacities, preferences, and histories into various environmental settings.

Particular places can serve as contact zones (Pratt, 1991), and support particular kinds of social interactions, exemplified by Deutsch and Collins' (1951) seminal research comparing racial attitudes in segregated and integrated housing (see Pickren, in press). Particular places are also contact zones between people and the physical characteristics of the built and natural world they inhabit. Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) argue that because visual cognition evolved before language, physical aspects of the world have a special relationship to human thought and the visual specifics of place have strong psychological meaning. SPSSI's scholarly, policy, and activist involvement with environment offers an understanding of the specifics of context in social issues research and how SPSSI has taken up environment throughout its history.

### Method

To study the interests, research, and activism of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) on environment and its shifts over time, we consulted five sources of data sources: articles in the *Journal of Social Issues*; editions of *Research Methods in Social Relations*; SPSSI's position statements; mentions of SPSSI in *The New York Times*; and reports of SPSSI's activities at the United Nations.

**The Journal of Social Issues.** The *Journal of Social Issues (JSI)* began publishing in 1945 and remains influential today. (See Perlman's 1986 history of the *JSI*). It is a rich, primary data source that focuses on a wide range of social issues and has a broad author base. The *JSI*, however, does not represent SPSSI's collective voice or its policies. Any researcher, SPSSI member or not, may publish in it. Nevertheless, the editor and editorial board of the *Journal of Social Issues* are typically SPSSI members; SPSSI members often contribute to the journal; and

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topics published in the journal interest SPSSI members as well as *JSI*'s broader readership. The EBSCO SocIndex database offers full-text electronic access to all articles published since 1945. We searched this database for mentions of “environment\*” (i.e., “environment,” “environments,” and “environmental”) in the title or abstract of all *JSI* articles from 1945 to the present. Articles we found represent most (but not all) *JSI* articles pertaining to the environment and offer good coverage over a 65 year period. This permits an analysis of the ways that *environment* has entered into SPSSI's scholarly and policy concerns over time. Given space limitations, we report selectively on the rich information we found.

***Research Methods in Social Relations.*** Spanning half a century, from 1951 to 2002, SPSSI has published seven editions of *Research Methods in Social Relations (RMSR)*. Stuart Cook describes it as founded to fill a niche: “At the time, there was no research methods book other than those dealing with laboratory experiments. Hence, it was natural for us to think of systematizing the variety of non-laboratory (as well as laboratory) methods becoming available to social scientists” (Perlman, 1986, p. 98). Each edition is distinct, with its own authors, editors, topics, and structure. Each offers insight into social issues research methods at the time of publication. To have a common reference point across editions, we utilized the index of each edition to identify environmental topics and observe shifts over time.

**SPSSI's position statements.** Because SPSSI began publishing the *Journal of Social Issues* in 1945 and *Research Methods in Social Relations* in 1951, we lacked information on SPSSI's environmental interests from 1936 to 1945. Since 1937, however, SPSSI has periodically announced its position on key and timely social issues and continues to do so on its website today (see Policy at <http://www.spssi.org>). As we will discuss, some of the 21 position statements from 1936 to 2010 indicate SPSSI's environmental interests.

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**Media mentions of SPSSI.** News articles on SPSSI also offer insight into SPSSI's environmental interests. Searching the website of *The New York Times*, a *newspaper of record* (Earl, Martin, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004), for "Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues" we found 41 articles on SPSSI from 1937 to 2002. Because some news articles report on SPSSI's position papers (e.g., "U.S. Action Urged," 1963), we discuss these two data sources together.

**SPSSI's Quadrennial Reports to the United Nations.** Since 1987, SPSSI has been a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information at the United Nations (UN) (see Cherry, Ellingwood, & Castillo, in press). In its UN work, SPSSI emphasizes the relevance of scholarly research to a wide variety of international social issues that include war, discrimination, poverty, racism, ageism, sexism, classism, and environmental protection and degradation. NGOs are required to submit a quadrennial report describing their UN activities over a four year period to member states of the UN. Reports from 1991 to 2006 describe activities of SPSSI's UN representatives in a summary format allowing us to examine SPSSI's UN efforts on environmentally related issues (See UN under Policy at <http://www.spssi.org>).

### ***Environment in SPSSI Scholarship***

Using these five archival sources, we examine *environment* in SPSSI's scholarship and activities since 1936. Of 3,363 *Journal of Social Issues* articles in EBSCO's database, 242 (7.2%) explicitly mention environment in the title or abstract (see Table 1). These data indicate that over seven decades, SPSSI scholars have embraced a broad range of contexts as *environmental*. We – a social psychologist and a geographer – saw that some authors describe environment as particular and concrete; others describe environment in a more general way. We

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identified three main environmental foci: physical, social, and metaphoric. Articles on the physical environment concern material and/or corporeal space or place. Articles on the social environment concern imagined or actual social relations without consideration of their physical location. Articles on the metaphoric environment invoke environment as a figure of speech without referring to space, place, or social environments.

**Physical environment.** Slightly more than half (53%, N= 127) of the 242 *Journal of Social Issues* articles with “environment\*” in the title or abstract discuss research on physical aspects of the built and natural environment, as Table 2 indicates. These references to environment have a corporeal reality and mention such sites as streets, housing, schools, universities, mental hospitals, day care facilities, nursing homes, neighborhoods, and cities. They also include specific places (e.g., Brentwood Veterans Administration Hospital, New York City, or Finland) and sites in nature, such as wilderness. In some studies, the physical environment is the research focus, but other are the context in which social issues occur, such as restaurants in research on segregated public accommodations.

**Social environment.** Two-fifths (41%, N= 99) of the 242 *Journal of Social Issues* articles with “environment\*” in the title or abstract discuss the social environment (see Table 2). Social environment articles examine cognitions, motivations, values, emotions, and behavior in real or imagined interactions. For example, articles on persuasion in pro-environmental public service announcements (Bator & Cialdini, 2000) or appeals to justice in environmental debates (Clayton, 1994) focus on cognitions, motives, and norms without referencing specific aspects of physical environments. Research on rape illustrates this distinction. An article on environmental features associated with risk of rape and street-savvy tactics to prevent rape was coded as

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physical environment (Riger & Gordon, 1981). An article on the socio-cultural context of rape, including its prevalence and meaning, was coded as social environment (Sanday, 1981).

**Metaphoric environment.** The EBSCO search included a small number of *JSI* articles (6%, N = 14) that refer to neither the physical nor social environment but mention, for example, “educational policy environment,” “informational environment,” and “media environment.” These articles, which specify neither a place nor a social environment, start to appear after 1960 and especially since 1990. Katz and Smith (1993) caution that when *environment* is used as a metaphor, it should be closely analyzed as it can implicitly claim a large conceptual terrain and subtly influence our understanding.

While it would be productive to focus on the social environment, including personal attitudes and social norms about environmental conservation (e.g., Clayton, 2000; Opotow, 1994; Schultz, 2000) or to focus on environment as a metaphor, this study highlights the physical environment and how it intersects with SPSSI’s scholarship and activism over 75 years. Doing so foregrounds an aspect of environment that is has sometimes relegated to background in social issues research.

### **SPSSI and the Physical Environment**

#### **Early Years (1936-1959)**

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues was founded in 1936 during the build-up toward World War II and began publishing the *JSI* in 1945, the year that the USA dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the war ended. The first three decades of SPSSI also included the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which integrated USA public schools (Klineberg, 1986; Pettigrew, in press); and the

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1957 launch of the first Earth-orbiting artificial satellite, Sputnik, by the Soviet Union, which intensified the Cold War. Traces of these major events are evident in our data.

The first two issues of the *Journal of Social Issues*, published in 1945, focus on racial and religious prejudice in everyday life (see Table 3). An article in the second issue describes a Japanese-American girl returning to her community after being interred during World War II. Abe (1945) describes Mary's life as "similar to that of other American girls of her age, but these are accentuated by the race factor" (p. 37). Indeed, the forced relocation and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans by the United States government in 1942, critically discussed by Limbert (1945), endures as an injustice the intersection of identity, race/ethnicity, and place. This issue is revisited in the *Journal of Social Issues* 45 years later in Nagata's 1990 study of Japanese-American's citizens' perceptions of their interment during World War II.

*Journal of Social Issues* articles on the physical environment in this period often are situated in congregate settings, particularly schools, summer camps, universities, workplaces, hospitals, and universities (e.g., Gump, Schoggen, & Red, 1957; Meltzer, 1956) (see Table 3). From 1954 through the 1960s SPSSI researchers focused on the struggle against racial segregation (Kimmel, 1997). Six issues concern race relations, prejudice, desegregation, and the changing South. The physical environmental is evident in an issue on post-war military occupations; an issue on Puerto Rico; and an issue on therapeutic camping for disturbed youth.

Indices of the 1<sup>st</sup> (Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1951) and 2<sup>nd</sup> (Selltiz, Johoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1959) editions of SPSSI's methods book, *Research Methods in Social Relations*, lists the physical environment in community self surveys (see Torre & Fine, in press), segregation, housing, and restaurants, reflecting research on discrimination during the Jim Crow period (see Table 4).

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SPSSI issued eight position statements in its first 25 years. Only parole from prison (1937) mentions the physical environment. After 1946, when racial segregation in public settings and racial violence was a salient social issue, SPSSI issued several position statements that addressed discrimination but these did not mention particular locales. Most *New York Times* mentions of SPSSI in this period comment on position statements promulgated by this new group, papers presented by its members at conventions, and studies by prominent members, but they do not mention the physical environment.

### **Middle Years (1960-1990)**

In the USA in the 1960s, the violence and segregation of the Jim Crow period weakened as the Civil Rights Movement gained in momentum (Franklin & Moss, 2000). In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Within this 30 year period the environment increased in salience as a social issue. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the first Earth Day (1970), and the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972) focused the public's attention on environmental issues and their urgency. In 1969, the USA's Apollo 11 landed the first humans on the moon. In 1975, the last Americans left Vietnam after a deadly and bitter war. In 1990, a United Nations climate change report warned of a 2 degrees Fahrenheit rise in global temperature within 35 years and recommended a worldwide reduction of CO2 emissions. A 1977 SPSSI member survey indicated that racism, energy conservation, and environmental protection are important issues (Kimmel, 1997). SPSSI's involvement in the *Brown v. Board* decision (Pettigrew, in press) and a 1965 SPSSI Council authorization of \$1500 to support official observers at civil rights demonstrations in the South (Kimmel, 1997, p. 21) offering evidence of SPSSI's activism in race relations.

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In the 1960s, environmental psychology emerged as a subdiscipline from committees and task forces formed to address the relationship between environment and behavior. In 1976, environmental psychology was incorporated into American Psychological Association's Division 34 (Division of Population Psychology) as the Division of Population and Environmental Psychology (Richards, 2000). SPSSI members Proshansky, Rivlin, and Ittleson played key roles in the new field and founded environmental psychology's first academic program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Proshansky describes this effort as originating with social psychologists who were frustrated with laboratory-based, experimental design that produced findings he called a "'failure' in the real world" (1987, p. 1470). Important social issues such as overcrowding and key concepts such as place identity, Proshansky argued, are specific to particular places and therefore call for fieldwork (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). As environmental psychology gained momentum, urban planners increasingly sought collaboration with environmental psychologists to answers to behavioral questions (cf., Studer & Stea, 1966). This led to cross-disciplinary collaborations that brought psychologists into contact with professionals doing applied work in specific contexts. Work in environmental and ecological psychology has continued to grow significantly since 1976 (Saegert, under review).

*Journal of Social Issues* articles referencing the physical environment in this period concern outer space, and soldiers' well-being after the Vietnam War (see Table 3). A 1966 *Journal of Social Issue*, "Man's Response to the Physical Environment," focused on the physical environment as a social issue in its own right. It brought together such emerging environmental issues as environmental stress, wilderness policy, and architectural and urban planning. In this issue, Kates (1966) argued that behavioral sciences and environmental quality are closely related. Scholarship addressing socially and physically complex issues such as public health, sanitary

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engineering, city and regional planning, and landscape architecture, therefore, require multidisciplinary collaborations.

Four *JSI* issues in this period concern the physical environment in urban life and residential mobility (see Table 3). “Urbanization and Social Change in the South” locates social issues within a particular geographical region, cities within that region and, within cities, in particular sites such as churches and courts. “Urban Life: Applying a Social Psychological Perspective” foregrounds cities to examine its influence on the 38% of the world’s population that lived in cities in 1980. In “Privacy as a Behavioral Phenomenon,” Archea (1977) argues that privacy depends on architectural elements that impose or reduce options for concealing and disclosing information about oneself. In “Residential Mobility: Theory, Research, and Policy,” Rivlin (1982) describes the changing nature of cities and the implications of this change for neighborhood and community life, group affiliation, and individual identity. In this issue, Fairchild and Tucker (1982) connect black residential mobility to a range of social issues as well as to specific physical environments. Black residential mobility has psychological, sociological, economic, demographic, and geographic origins and effects. In addition to attention to contexts, an historical analysis, they argue, is needed to understand population migrations through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the internal slave trade within the USA, racial segregation policies, and migrations from the South because of northern industrialization. Like earlier scholars of the physical environment, they call for multidisciplinary approach to research. Together, these *JSIs* indicate an increasing interest in the specifics of the physical environment to understand its influence on people’s lives and its relevance in social issues.

Three editions of *Research Methods in Social Relations* were published from 1960 to 1990. The index of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Selltiz, Wright, & Cook, 1976) reflects the influence of

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environmental psychology in the increase of physical sites mentions and issues: housing, street gangs, camp studies, bus riding, personal space, traffic, and privacy (see Table 4). The index of the 4<sup>th</sup> (Kidder, 1981) and 5<sup>th</sup> editions (Kidder & Judd, 1986) include a smaller set of physical environment topics: field work, privacy, behavior setting surveys, ecological observation and, added in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, environmental impact studies.

Two *New York Times* articles mention SPSSI in relation to the physical environment. One describes an American Jewish Congress report based on SPSSI research that argues against two racial integration myths (“Pamphlet Assails Integration Myths,” 1960). The first myth is that property values will decline if black Americans and Puerto Rican move into all white neighborhoods. The second myth is that intermarriage will increase if black and white Americans live in the same areas and attend the same schools. A second *New York Times* article describes research presented at the 1963 American Psychological Association meeting by Thomas Pettigrew on the value of civil rights marches, a controversial use of public space at that time, because of their potential to achieve greater participation in society and more equitable access to societal resources (Harrison, 1963). During this period, SPSSI’s 1966 position statement on the Vietnam War described the tendency to minimize harm committed by ‘our side,’ emphasizing that distortions in moral perceptions can emerge in particular geo-political conflicts.

### **Recent Years: 1991-2011**

Environmental issues from 1991 to the present include a 1994 UN report warning of severe and long term impacts from greenhouse gas; a 1998 discovery that the ozone hole over Antarctica has grown to 25 million square kilometers; a 1999 report that the Earth is experiencing the largest mass extinction of species in history; a 1999 report that world’s human population has reached 6 billion. The 2005 the Kyoto Protocol sought to address climate change

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by mandating a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions in industrial countries. Those two decades included such destructive and deadly environmental disasters as the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean, 2005's Hurricane Katrina in the US Gulf Coast, and the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico from Deepwater Horizon, an offshore oil rig.

In the past two decades, the *Journal of Social Issues* has focused on the physical environment, first, as an issue that needs to be understood as an integral part of other social issues and, second, as an urgent social issue of international importance. As Table 3 indicates, two *JSIs* examine homelessness, one focused on urban settings and the other on developed nations. This complex social issue connects the physical environment with human socio-economic circumstances. Four issues address SPSSI's ongoing concern with discrimination and prejudice in their focus on intergroup relations and social policy in the USA and Europe. Three issues address social dislocation and intergroup conflict in an issue on immigration, one focusing on the Middle East and the other on Northern Ireland. One issue concerns the Persian Gulf War. Two issues address privacy and the connection between residential location and health. Five issues explicitly focus on the environment and environmentalism and, like scholars in prior decades, urge psychologists to conduct multidisciplinary research with kindred professionals to prevent ecological degradation and disaster (Oskamp, 1995).

SPSSI's two most recent editions of *Research Methods in Social Relations* list physical environment topics that are similar to the prior 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> editions (see Table 4). The 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991) lists fieldwork, privacy, behavior setting surveys, ecological observations, and environmental impact studies. The 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002) includes these topics but not privacy.

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Since 1991, SPSSI has issued four position statements. Two have relevance to the physical environment but in different ways: the statement on interrogation and torture (2007) and the statement on climate change (2010). There are three mentions of SPSSI in *The New York Times*, fewer than in prior periods. One, relevant to the physical environment, reports on a SPSSI-supported study of girls under 18, indicating that they would curtail their use of community sexual health service facilities if parental notification were required (Flaherty, 2002).

In 1987, SPSSI became a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) at the United Nations (UN) and since 1991 it has held consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council. At the UN, SPSSI's members' scholarly expertise serves as a basis for advocating for sound environmental policy. For more than two decades, SPSSI's United Nations Committee in New York and, more recently, Geneva, actively participate in international environmental initiatives, working with other NGOs to promote empirically-based and environmentally-sound policies throughout the world. SPSSI's quadrennial reports of its activities (DeMeyer, 2006) from 1991 to 2006 indicate that SPSSI has been involved in preparations for UN Conferences on Environment and Development and the UN Conferences on Human Settlements, served as consultants to the UN Environmental Programme, and participated on NGO committees on sustainable development. As described in a SPSSI document on the UN page of the SPSSI website ([www.spssi.org](http://www.spssi.org)), SPSSI's *JSI* scholarship has relevance for the UN Millennium Development Goal of fostering "Environmentally responsible behavior: Teaching and promoting it effectively" (cf., Woodside & Walker, 2008).

### **Limitations: A Methodological Note**

We conclude this section on our findings with a methodological caution. Data from the seven editions of *Research Methods in Social Relations* (see Table 4) suggests that SPSSI's

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research texts have shifted their emphasis on the physical environment twice in the 50 years that these books were published (1951-2002). Two early editions (1951 and 1959) focus on specific community sites particularly those connected with segregation. The 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (1976) includes a broad range of physical environment mentions, perhaps coinciding with the emergence and influence of environment psychology in the mid-1970s. In 1981 the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the methods book and subsequent editions shifted to a narrower set of topics that focus on methods that investigate the physical world rather than specific sites for social issues research.

We note that we decided to use the index as a common point of reference among the seven editions. Our data, therefore, is based on each book's index rather than on that book's text. As a result, we could have missed descriptions of the physical environment within the text. For example, 'nuclear reactors' is not listed as a term in the index of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Research Methods in Social Relations* (1986). However, the text contains an extended description of Rosalie Bertell's epidemiological research on the relationship between propinquity of nuclear power plants and health (pp. 421-426). Her study found higher death rates for low birth weight infants downwind of reactors. When considered in light of research that ruled out alternative explanations, her research offers evidence of a health risk that might otherwise have remained undetected. This research, situated in a particular physical environment, was utilized by the book's authors to illustrate the value of applied and real-world research. This clarifies that the use of indices as an expedient could have introduced error into our analysis (L. Kidder, personal communication, Sept. 11, 2010). The index, as a guide to a book's contents, is often written by an indexer. Our data, therefore, were filtered by an indexer's decisions about what to include and leave out. Similarities among the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> edition and in the 4<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> editions may have occurred because the same indexer was retained by the publisher or because later indexers

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utilized a prior edition as a template. Consequently, our data do not identify all physical environment mentions in the methods books so we cannot know if there has been a qualitative or quantitative change in research attention to the physical environment over time. We recognize this limitation of our findings. Yet Table 4 is nevertheless provocative. The shifts in interests we found are plausible, and research approaches are continually evolving. An empirical studies of research methods that researchers use to investigate the physical environment could be useful.

### **The Present and Future**

In 2000, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan initiated a comprehensive study of the state of the Earth's environment, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. It examines consequences of ecological change throughout the world in order to provide a scientific basis for policies enhancing conservation through the sustainable use of ecosystems to promote human and environmental wellbeing. This report, *Ecosystems and human well-being: Synthesis* (2005) yields four major findings with significant social issues relevance. It found that in the past 50 years, ecosystems have changed more rapidly and extensively than any comparable period of human history because of rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber and fuel. This demand resulted in substantial and irreparable losses in diversity of life forms on Earth. These negative ecosystem changes will diminish benefits that future generations can obtain from ecosystems. Second, human activities have changed ecosystems in ways that have led to substantial gains in human well-being and economic development, but these gains have been achieved at the increasing cost of ecosystem degradation, risking irreversible change that will adversely affect vulnerable groups and exacerbate poverty. This emphasizes the close relationship between the wellbeing of the physical environment and social issues. Third, the degradation of ecosystems will impede the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development

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Goals that address the world's development challenges, including poverty, hunger, child and maternal mortality, education, disease control and management, gender disparities, and environmental sustainability (cf., Woodside & Walker, 2008). This finding recognizes the close relationship between social issues and sustainable social development. Fourth, although human actions are depleting the Earth and straining the planet's ability to sustain future generations, appropriate actions taken now can reverse degradation in many ecosystems in the next 50 years. Doing so, however, requires substantial changes in policy, practices, and societal institutions that are not currently underway. This finding is consistent with SPSSI's environmental scholarship that has repeatedly emphasized the important relationship between the physical environment and social issues and the value of multidisciplinary work. This report clarifies how SPSSI's three traditional concerns, peace, prejudice, poverty, are entwined with the physical environment. To create a livable world for future generations it is essential to address the interconnectedness of human and planetary well being.

### **Conclusion: The Specifics of Context**

Across 75 years and five data sources, we found a vigorous research tradition in SPSSI's interests, research, publications, and advocacy as it address the physical environment. In SPSSI's first decades, from 1935 through 1959, social issues and physical environment were often linked, but *environment* was not yet a social issue in its own right. Yet the physical environment was studied as an influential context within which individuals and groups live, relate to others, work, learn, and heal. In SPSSI's middle decades from 1960 to 1990, the growth of the environmental movement and environmental psychology led to awareness of environmental issues as important social issues in their own right. Since 1990, scholarship of the physical environment is increasingly international and addresses a wide range of environmental issues.

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Using the lens of the physical environment, we see that *environment* has had broad meaning over these seven decades, encompassing the natural and built environment, the local and global, environmental degradation and conservation, and micro to macro contexts where social interactions and social issues take place. This body of work, as well as the work of individual scholars, emphasizes a bidirectional causal arrow as the environment influences social relations and people, in turn, influence the environment.

How *environment* has been addressed in SPSSI's history offers contemporary scholars a broad way to think about environmental research and the physical sites where it is situated. It argues that attention to the contingencies of place is important. Physical contexts offer a concrete venue in which scholars can address the complex social issues connected with environment. By situating social issues within the material contingencies that influence them, we can be attentive to the inclusionary possibilities and constraints of particular places and how these places have been understood and used over time. Noting what is physical about social issues can integrate foreground and background across time. Consistent with Lewin's  $B = f(P \times E)$  theorem, this can more fully explain the complexities of social behavior and suggest practical solutions to pressing social issues throughout the world.

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Table 1. *JSI* articles published per period with “environment\*” in its title or abstract

	<u>1945-1959</u>	<u>1960-1990</u>	<u>1991-2010</u>	<u>Total</u>
Percentage of Years Each Period Represents for Tenure of <i>JSI</i>	21.54% (14 years)	46.15% (30 years)	29.23% (19 years)	
Number/ of <i>JSI</i> Published Articles Per Period	607	1779	968	3412
Percentage of <i>JSI</i> Published Articles Per Period	17.79%	52.23%	29.98%	
Number of <i>JSI</i> Published Articles That Use “Environment*”	14	126	105	245
Percentage of <i>JSI</i> Published Articles That Use “Environment*”	2.31%	7.07%	10.85%	7.2%

Data source: EBSCO SocINDEX database.

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Table 2. Number and percentage of *JSI* articles published by type — physical, social, and metaphoric.

	<u>1945-1959</u>	<u>1960-1990</u>	<u>1991-2010</u>	<u>Sum</u>
Physical	7	63	58	128
	5.47%	49.22%	45.31%	52.24%
Social	7	58	37	102
	6.86%	56.86%	36.27%	41.63%
Metaphoric	0	5	10	15
	0%	33.33%	66.67%	6.12%

Data source: EBSCO SocINDEX database.

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Table 3. Special issues of *Journal of Social Issues* with a physical environment focus**1945-1959**

- Weltfish, G. (1945a, 1945b). Racial and religious prejudice in everyday living, *1*(1/2).
- Neilson, W.A. (1946) American military occupation, *2*(3).
- Merton, R.K., SalterWest, P., Jahoda, M., & Selvin, H.C. (1951). Social policy and social research in housing, *7*(1).
- Cannell, W., & Withey, S.B. (1953). Community change: An action program in Puerto Rico, *9*(1).
- Clark, K.B. (1953). Desegregation: An appraisal of the evidence, *9*(4).
- Bachrach, A.J., & Blackwell, G.W. (1954). Human problems in the changing South, *10*(1).
- Mayer, A.J. (1957). Race relations in private housing. *13*(4).
- McNeil, E.B. (1957). Therapeutic camping for disturbed youth, *13*(1).
- Pettigrew, T.F. (1959). Desegregation research in the North and South, *15*(4).

**1960-1990**

- Krugman, H.E., & Michael, D.N. (1961). Social psychological implications of man in space, *17*(2).
- Reissman, L., & Ktsanes, T. (1966). Urbanization and social change in the South, *22*(1).
- Kates, R.W., & Wohlwill, J.F. (1966). Man's response to the physical environment, *22*(4).
- Mantell, D.M., & Pilisuk, M. (1975). Soldiers in and after Vietnam, *31*(4).
- Margulies, S. (1977). Privacy as a behavioral phenomenon, *33*(3).
- Krupat, E. (1980). Urban life: Applying a social psychological perspective, *36*(3).
- Shumaker, S.A., & Stokols, D. (1982). Residential mobility: Theory, research, and policy, *38*(2).
- Seligman, C., & Syme, G. (1989). Managing the environment, *45*(1).
- Shinn, M., & Weitzman, B.C. (1990). Urban homelessness, *46*(4).

**1991-2009**

- Cvetkovich, G., & Earle, T.C. (1992). Public responses to environmental hazards, *48*(4).
- Lehman, D.R. (1993). Psychological research on the Persian Gulf War, *49*(4).
- Clayton, S. & Opatow, S. (1994). Green justice: Conceptions of fairness and the natural world *50*(3).
- McKenzie-Mohr, D., & Oskamp, S. (1995). Psychology and the promotion of a sustainable future, *51*(4).
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- Zelezny, L.C., & Schultz, P.W. (2000). Promoting environmentalism, *56*(3).
- Esses, V.M., Dovidio, J.F., & Dion, K.L. (2001). Immigrants and immigration, *55*(3).
- Margulis, S. (2003). Contemporary perspectives on privacy: Social, psychological, political *59*(2).
- Hartig, T., & Lawrence, R. (2003). The residential context of health, *59*(3).
- Zirkel, S., Lopez, G.E., & Brown, L.M. (2004). The 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*: Interethnic contact and change in education in the 21st century, *60*(1).
- Hertz-Lazarowitz, R., Zelniker, T., Stephan, C., & Stephan, W. (2004). Arab-Jewish coexistence programs, *60*(2).
- Muldoon, O.T. (2004). The cost of conflict: Children and the Northern Irish Troubles, *60*(3).
- Vlek, C., & Steg, L. (2007). Human behavior and environmental sustainability, *63*(1).
- Toro, P. (2007). International perspectives on homelessness in developed nations, *63*(3).
- Zick, A., Pettigrew, T.F., & Wagner, U. (2008). Ethnic prejudice and discrimination in Europe, *64*(2).

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Table 4. Physical environment in the indices of *Research Methods in Social Relations*

<i>Edition</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Publication Date</i>	<b>1951</b>	<b>1959</b>	<b>1976</b>	<b>1981</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2002</b>
Census	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Community, -self-surveys	x	x					
Segregation	x	x					
Housing, interracial housing	x	x	x				
Restaurants		x					
Street gangs		x	x				
Camp studies			x				
Bus riding			x				
Personal space			x				
Traffic research			x				
Field studies, -work, -notes			x	x	x	x	x
Invasion of privacy			x	x	x	x	
Behavior setting survey				x	x	x	x
Ecological observations				x	x	x	x
Environmental impact studies					x	x	x

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