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Culture, Environmental Action and Sustainability



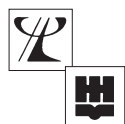
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I. Introduction

Culture, environmental action and sustainability

Ricardo García Mira, José M. Sabucedo Cameselle, & José Romay Martínez

The 17th IAPS Conference held in Corunna (Spain) in 2002 reflected interest in a large number of themes of current importance and relevance in the study of person–built environment interaction in general. On this occasion, the centre of attention focussed on the analysis of the role played by culture in forming quality of life within the framework of a process that we are all witnessing and which goes by the name of globalisation. The study of this singular interaction, under the influence of processes such as those that the various authors included in this book attempt to describe, is of vital importance given its implications to the present and future lives of all citizens.

This book includes research that has taken place into this wide-ranging topic, grouped into the specific subject areas that we will now briefly discuss.

Culture, quality of life and globalisation

It has now been clear for several years that the reciprocal interaction of people with their environment, and the environmental problems that are the result, cannot be the object of thorough study unless we take into account the general dimensions in which people live their lives. In this regard it must be said that over the last few decades we have been faced with three major interrelated dimensions that affect our everyday life on both an individual and group level, and which determine and, at the same time, are determined by the multiple facets of human life. These three super-dimensions are, in turn, shaped by the major changes that have taken place in the world since the end of World War II, and particularly after the 1960s, changes for which an explanation has been sought from a macro-social standpoint such as the post-modern age, whose repercussions affect the way personal values are shaped – as Inglehart, amongst others, has pointed out. Post-modernity, therefore, cannot be understood without reference being made to the new dimensions of culture, the importance of quality of life, and globalisation.

On the other hand, faced with a culture taken almost exclusively to mean Western culture, other cultures such as the Eastern, African, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, etc. have

gradually established themselves as cultures in their own right. In short, cultures have bloomed because they have been taken to be what surrounds and is closest to individual lives and actions, and is expressed in the individual's language, traditions, way of life and methods of production. What is more, we are nowadays witnessing the defense of former ways of life that affect not only the landscape, but also the habitat, work, and, in short, what can be called sustainability.

The abandonment in mass of the countryside and farming in many areas of the world has resulted in the loss of many spaces linked to the traditional methods of production and has contributed to a reorganisation of spaces, creating urban conglomerations with all their associated problems of pollution, traffic, noise, precarious employment, often accompanied by a lower level of quality of life. There have undoubtedly been improvements in medicine, hygiene, diet and education, and these have been powerful contributors to the improved quality of life of the population as a whole, but we must not ignore the fact that many marginal city-dwellers have frequently had to suffer the negative consequences of poorly planned or uncontrolled growth. On the other hand, the increase in the older population has led to an increase in applied research into district planning and housing design. A further contribution has been made by the valuing of natural elements such as air and water, precisely because of their scarcity, and of a healthy diet.

The chapter by García-Mira, Sabucedo and Romay analyses these three dimensions of culture, quality of life and globalisation, placing them in their broadest psychosocial context and analysing the tensions generated by a global culture in the smaller-sized spheres of local cultures, whilst at the same time calling for a space for reflection in which the complexity of social organisation in a changing world and the transformation that this works on our lifestyles can be analysed. The study also looks at the role of psychology in interpreting the way in which culture itself constructs the framework for interpreting reality, and puts forward the need to make the existence of a global framework of interaction between cultures compatible with the necessary recognition of the idiosyncratic specificity of each culture.

However, within this cultural specificity, it is only possible to attain a high level of quality of life and harmonious development free of conflicts with other cultures if globalisation policies are developed within a set of fair and balanced parameters. In this context, Uzzell emphasises the concept of "sustainable development" as being one of the most important ideas of the 20th century, since it is around this concept that our common future turns. It demands that all citizens in general, but more particularly those in positions of political power, assume the responsibility for global environmental change, as opposed to local or personal changes. As a result of globalisation, time has conquered space and the mass media play a vital role in the very structuring and definition of reality. For this reason, we have reached a point where people consider global environmental problems to be more serious than those that take place lower down on the spatial scale.

Family and school are the two contexts in which children can become the real promoters of the attitudinal and behavioural change that must spread to all levels of the community, with place identity, manifest through the interrelationship between individuals, and also between these and place, being a major dimension of environmental attitudes.

Vleck presents an expanded commons dilemma model that allows us to understand and handle the tensions between individual and collective interests, paying particular attention to transport problems, for which possible solutions are proposed from a perspective of sustainability.

The close relationship between economic progress, work, income and quality of life is interpreted on a personal level by people who value health, the family and safety as the most important elements in their lives. We can therefore say that the problems of sustainability are multidimensional problems characterised by the impacts, causes and processes of the economic, social and environmental dimensions in which the tensions between the individual and the collective, i.e. between individual freedom and social equity, are involved.

Ellin analyses how it is possible to make a place for oneself in this global village, together with the means that the new technologies provide for doing so. He verifies, however, the failure of postmodernist town planning, which makes it necessary to re-define values, goals and the means with which to reach them. Ellin points out that in fact things have attained crisis proportions in both the natural and the built environment, and draws our attention to the warning contained in the United Nations Environment Programme regarding the very short time left – little more than a decade – within which to achieve environmental sustainability before entering a state of physical and economic decline.

Environmental action and participation

Environmental action and participation is a major component of the person-environment line of study, and several contributions fall within its ambit. The first is a study by Migliorini, Piermari and Venini that deals with the aspects of neighbourhood, the sense of community and participation in Genova, Italy. As its authors point out, the sense of community is a key concept with which people must familiarise themselves in the context of an urban reality, particularly if we consider the massive expansion of cities the world over in the last fifty years. Massive migration to the cities has fractured many of our social networks and the sense of small urban communities, which have to be rebuilt if we want to avoid situations of social anomie. The authors highlight the role of the natural and social environmental context in promoting contacts and shaping feelings and emotions of belonging.

Wiesenfeld, Sánchez and Cronick present a participatory action research model (PAR), which, although not often used in psychology, as the authors themselves mention, may prove extremely useful not only in solving environmental problems but also in the construction of knowledge and the education of the participants.

In this respect, the authors point out that the habitat is a global phenomenon whose study cannot be undertaken as a politically neutral academic exercise, environmental psychology having the possibility to play a major role in redefining the ideological parameters as well as in providing an individual solution to the problems and in the very construction of the matter as an important active agent in the diagnosis and remedying of environmental problems. A significant element in this model is the dialectic resolution that occurs when the various views held by the participants combine to produce new options, which in turn are defined as problems by the participants, who demand practical changes appropriate to their community.

The final goal is to empower the participants so that they can continue to resolve the fundamental environmental problems of their community. In this way, the aim of the authors is not only to help the community overcome its specific problems, but also, and

even firstly, to empower and to train the members of the community in methods of solving problems that may arise in the future, through the combination of the contributions of scientific knowledge, common sense, community tradition and the consideration and experience that spring from the practice of communal relationships.

Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours cannot be understood and sustained on a global level without a close link to the system of social values, which are in turn determined by the cultures in which they are rooted. In this regard, Chin-Chin Kuo and Terry Purcell offer us the results of empirical research into the values and pro-environmental behaviours in traditional Chinese culture, notwithstanding the difficulties inherent in the study of a culture with such a vast history and covering such a variety of ethnic groups. The starting point for these authors is the belief that values are the best predictors of pro-environmental behaviour. When factor analysis is performed on the opinions of the experts, five factors emerge: harmony and balance with nature, simple lifestyle, spiritual communion with nature, altruistic and benevolent norms and *feng shui*. Although these values, when taken together, evoke in us a vision of the oriental way of life, they in fact overlap and interweave with Western cultural values, particularly from the standpoint of the environmental movement.

Raudsepp studies the behaviour of several socio-demographic and socio-psychological variables on environmental attitudes and behaviour in the rural population of Hiinmaa (Estonia). Amongst the socio-demographic variables studied those that appear as significant predictors of environmentalism are age, sex, education and subjective religiousness, whilst values, perceived control over the environment, local identity and childhood experience of nature are the most significant amongst the socio-psychological variables. Other significant predictors are family income and perceived pro-environmental local regulations. The results of this study indicate, however, that socio-psychological factors outweigh socio-demographic ones and point to the existence of factors other than those measured that would be responsible for the unexplained variance in environmental beliefs, attitudes and behaviour within the inherent heterogeneity of environmentalism.

The subject of sustainability, in the form of adopting sustainable technologies in housing construction by means of user participation in decision-making groups, is taken up by Ornetzeder from the perspective of the research recommendations for the “Building of Tomorrow” launched in 1999 by the Australian Ministry of Science. The recommendations made regarding the forming and progress of the group sessions may prove extremely useful within a participatory methodology designed to produce interaction between housing architects and builders and users in the search for a home that will satisfy its inhabitants within a sustainable environmental model.

Losada and García Mira investigate the role of action competence in environmental education, analysing the results of a study involving secondary school students who were presented with an environmental problem upon which they had to demonstrate their competence, identifying its causes and the consequences that derived from it. The problem in question dealt with the degree of cooperation or non-cooperation in waste separation within the home. The students were asked to propose possible actions that would lead to a solution of this problem, and to state the difficulties that a change in behaviour may have to face. The sum of these four dimensions – causes, consequences, actions and difficulties – would result in the concept of *action competence*, as defined by Jensen (1993). The results of this study indicate the advisability of introducing this scheme of action competence into environmental education and educational programmes in general, as a means of contributing to achieving a more sustainable society.

Urban sustainability and cultural diversity

Under this general heading the reader will find various studies that deal with questions which, far from enabling us to see a city as a conglomerate of individuals, present it as a conglomerate of cultures, experiences and actions that may either prejudice or favour its sustainable development. In this context, Moser, Legendre and Ratiu analyse the patterns of adapting the networks of interaction between citizens to the restriction that city life itself imposes. They show the effect that the lack of free time and other restrictions has on relational behaviour. Thus, the world of relationships that have their origin in one's neighbourhood, through neighbourhood associations or at work, is much larger for those who live in Paris and its outlying suburbs than for those who live in smaller towns or cities.

So whilst half of the inhabitants of Paris maintain their social relationships within the above-mentioned ambits, this is only true of one-third of those inhabitants interviewed in a small city (Tours). This means that due to the large distances between places in big cities, our social networks are organised around our neighbourhood and its organisations, or the workplace. However, those inhabitants of large cities who have the opportunity of spending their weekends outside the city (second homes) develop relations of friendship and support similar to those who live in the provinces.

Seidel reflects on the influence of the new technologies, the Internet in particular, on decision-making and how this can affect the distribution of wealth and labour, frequently in opposition to the ideal of sustainability.

Y.J. Lee applies the UIP (Urban Indicators Programme) of the UNCHS (United Nations Center for Human Settlement) to the expansion of Taipei, concluding that sustainability is achievable if attention is paid to technological aspects and efficient governance. In the same order of things, Zacharias highlights the advantages of non-motorised transport for Chinese cities.

Cimsit, Edgü and Ünlu investigate the influences of sociocultural parameters on the physical structure and environmental adaptation of two cities.

"The dialectics of urban play" in the city of Melbourne is the subject of a study by Stevens, since not all aspects of urban social life are rational and predictable, with everyday social practices having a key part to play in its development. Particular attention is paid to spatial design due to its influence on performance, representation and control.

Blandy and Parsons investigate "gated communities" within the ambit of implantation of urban policies in the United Kingdom and the framework of globalisation and national politics. Lay and Basso study the dynamics of social life in the streets and open spaces of three different residential areas of the city of Campo Grande (Brazil).

Children and the environment

This chapter brings together several different themes which cover aspects relating to environmental interaction from the standpoint of childhood. The first of these stresses the methodological aspects, and is a study by Anguera, Santoyo and Espinosa, who by means of observational designs of a diachronic, nomothetic and multidimensional nature measure the intensity of social connections in a school-based social network.

Rissotto presents a project (Cittá Educativa) that seeks to improve the urban environment from a children's perspective. This project has been operating since 1991, mainly in

Italy but also in some cities in Argentina and Spain. Its principal contributions being those related to the changes in our perception of childhood that has led local governments to introduce innovative choices and to seek the involvement of the community.

Within the scope of this project, Balzani and Borgogni present a research paper on safety in school and leisure routes in Ferrara (Italia), showing how an association, the Faculty of Architecture and the local authorities have managed to cooperate on this matter.

A group formed by Kowaltowski and his colleagues from the State University of Campinas (Brazil) presents the results of a public project to improve environmental comfort in school buildings. To this end the classrooms and playgrounds were observed and measured, and the various agents involved in the educational process were asked to give their opinion and state their wishes, with the aim of improving the degree of satisfaction experienced in the use of the different spaces in schools.

The elderly and the environment

This final section deals with all those matters concerning the elderly, a subject of great current interest given the progressive ageing of the world's population, particularly in the West. Hoyland gives us the results of research into nursing homes in Norway, showing that small homes (6–10 residents) are much more satisfactory than large ones from the point of view of both staff and residents. This model, in our view, could be of great valued when we consider the construction of places in which groups of people cohabit, whether they be old people's homes or residences for other groups (children, adolescents, students, etc.).

Greenwald contributes a study on new urban planning as the key factor in the mobility of the elderly, from the perspective of the role of new urban planning in the design of new instruments that will contribute to the introduction of more manageable environments for the elderly.

The same line is followed by Heijs, whose study explores the preferences, wishes and demands of the elderly with regard to their homes, with the aim of promoting the introduction of appropriate measures in a population in Eindhoven (Netherlands).

Finally, Lázaro and Gil present a study whose purpose is to identify the activities related to environmental education carried out by the elderly in Spain with regard to children and young people in the ambit of the family. The results show a significant influence that complements the environmental education provided by the parents of these children and adolescents.

Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to all the authors for their interesting contributions, which we are convinced will help to increase the amount of much-needed cumulative knowledge available to us regarding the study of the nature of the person-environment relationship. We are also deeply grateful to those experts who took part in the scientific review of all the manuscripts received for their time and efforts. It is our hope, then, that this book will prove a useful tool for the future work of researchers and those involved in decision-making processes, and that it will therefore contribute to improving the conditions of quality of life of individual citizens and to a better use of environmental resources in a framework of sustainability, multi-culturality and responsible environmental actions that will undoubtedly act in favour of the overall aim of achieving long-lasting progress and development.

II. Culture, quality of life and globalisation

Culture, quality of life and globalisation

Ricardo García Mira¹, José M. Sabucedo Cameselle², & José Romay Martínez¹

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Abstract. This chapter analyses the dimensions of culture, quality of life and globalisation, placing them in their broadest psychosocial context and analysing the tensions generated by a global culture in the smaller-sized spheres of local cultures, whilst at the same time calling for a space for reflection in which the complexity of social organisation in a changing world and the transformation that this works on our lifestyles can be analysed. The study also looks at the role of psychology in interpreting the way in which culture itself constructs the framework for interpreting reality, and puts forward the need to make the existence of a global framework of interaction between cultures compatible with the necessary recognition of the idiosyncratic specificity of each culture.

Keywords: culture, quality of life, globalisation, social construction, environment

Culture, quality of life and globalisation are three concepts which, in addition to their generic nature, also provide a clear and concise pointer to basic questions in our academic activity, as well as being in tune with some of the major concerns of our age. At the same time, they represent three interrelated aspects that are not only the subject of academic analysis, but also underlie many of today's political and social debates. It is not in vain that these concepts, in their broadest sense, refer us back to personal and social themes of great significance, such as identity, value systems, intergroup relations, care of the environment, health, etc.

Culture shapes our minds, as various seminal studies such as those by Vygotsky have pointed out, directing and conditioning our actions in the political, social and economic sphere. Culture is also a sign of personal and social identity through which we choose the way we live, our adoption of a particular lifestyle, our intellectual deci-

sion-making and our interaction with others. Culture also affects our choice of a place to live, or the selection of physical shapes and contours in all aspects of our lives. This all takes place in a feedback system that in turn contributes to the very creation of culture.

As is the case with many other concepts in the social sciences, culture has been defined in many different ways, which is logical if we take into account the multiple aspects and nuances that can be put forward from different theoretical standpoints. The present study is neither the time nor the place, however, to attempt a definition of culture that brings together the variety of perspectives that surround it, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) did in their time. This would be a meaningless, as well as complex, task in an article written with the aim of showing that a large number of current intellectual, social, economic and political challenges find their natural place in some of the themes that characterised the 17th IAPS conference. It will therefore be enough to recall the proposal put forward by Tylor (1871), who was above all a generalist, when he defined culture as that complex array of knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, habits, etc. that a person acquires when he or she belongs to a particular society. In common with every definition that seeks to be all-encompassing, Tylor's proposal disregards some aspects that are essential if considered from the standpoint of social psychology and a specific idea of what a human being is.

Firstly, we have to recognise that the relation between the *individual* and *society* is more dynamic than has traditionally been supposed. The way in which this relation has been set out from certain theoretical standpoints, linked to specific social problems, has stressed the first element of the pair to the detriment of the second, leading to a totally passive view of the human being, who merely assumes and internalises the dominant beliefs and representations of his or her environment. This becomes apparent in Althusser's concept of ideology, in which individuals find themselves at the mercy of ideological determinations. Similarly, the collective representations proposed by Durkheim reiterate this passive view of the individual, which is why we have questioned the validity of this theory being considered the intellectual predecessor of the work of Moscovici (Billig & Sabucedo, 1994). This line of thinking, in our opinion, implies several serious risks. One of these, which is of particular relevance to the theme under discussion, is that of the reification of social systems and beliefs and of institutions. In opposition to this idea, it should be stated that social systems and everything they represent and mean are by no means alien to human activity. They are not something set apart from people that influence their behaviour. Rather, social systems and all their products are a part of human activity, the result of conflicts and interactions between individuals and groups. Berger and Luckman (1968) produced an excellent analysis of this problem with regard to the social order when they unequivocally stated that the said order is a human product that is constantly being created and modified.

Likewise, culture is also a human product. And if we understand it as such, then there are two aspects which must be emphasised: firstly, the influence that it exerts on individuals who are born into a specific cultural and social niche; and secondly, that culture itself is continuously affected by the action of the same individuals. In other words, contrary to a determinist philosophy regarding context, society or culture, the thesis we defend is that of taking interaction, whether it be between individuals or between individuals and their social and physical environment, as being the most appropriate level at which to analyse, understand and explain human behaviour and its relationship with the environment.