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Field Note

# Researching psychic dimensions of ecological degradation: Notes from the field

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**Abstract** This essay presents a narrative of a psychosocial research investigation into the complex experiences of environmental degradation, conducted as a field study in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Using in-depth, psychoanalytically informed research interviews, the study explored the presence of ambivalent, contradictory narratives, suggesting that the experience of environmental degradation may in fact be constituted in part by loss and mourning, which may manifest as a form of environmental melancholia. Such insights are directly relevant for how we conceptualize and imagine theories of agency, engagement and participation. I discuss aspects of the research design, methodology, opportunities and challenges of the project and suggest the need to apply qualitative, psychosocial research methods to the immensely challenging and charged ecological challenges we currently face.

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## Beginnings

As a college freshman in 1986, while volunteering at the Peace and Justice Center in Santa Cruz, CA, I picked up a copy of Joanna Macy's (1983) *Despair and Empowerment in the Nuclear Age*. I stopped what I was doing, and read. At the time I was struggling to choose between environmental studies and social psychology as my major – and wanting somehow to connect the two. In the pages of that book, for the first time, I found articulated connections between psychic experience and global environmental crises. Macy described

activities she had designed to help people “connect” with their feelings of grief, anger, sadness, and profound personal helplessness surrounding nuclear weaponry. However, it was Robert Jay Lifton’s (1967, 1979) concept of psychic numbing and the unconscious dimensions of such large-scale social trauma as the nuclear bomb that particularly captivated me. This concept of psychic numbing reminded me of what I was witnessing during my environmental studies lectures, as we would file out of the classroom having just learned of a series of highly distressing ecological threats taking place and looming on the horizon.

Subsequently, over the years, I investigated psychological studies attempting to engage with unconscious dimensions of war, weapons and environmental threats. I was most interested in the thinking of psychoanalysts engaging actively with sociopolitical issues, although the literature on the environment and our relations with the nonhuman, natural world was surprisingly scant. I was increasingly drawn to trauma studies as a lens for approaching how degradation can affect populations; however, *trauma* as a concept appeared too interior, too vague to pass muster with my social-scientist colleagues. My assertions of environmental issues as “traumatic” bewildered my colleagues in environmental studies. I knew that I wanted to understand more about the complexities of what it meant to live with ecological degradation. I wanted to go beyond whatever opinions or attitudes we might have, to what may be taking place affectively, that is, the experience of chronic ecological degradation – how it is mediated, made sense of and responded to.

As many of us know and document in this journal, tracing the affective in the political, social and cultural spheres is fraught and difficult – particularly with respect to finding the appropriate languages and methods. For my first major study of environmental “trauma” and affective dimensions, I chose to conduct a media analysis of a chronic ecological issue – *pfisteria piscicida* and fish kills in North Carolina (Lertzman, 1999) – freeing me to engage literary scholars as well as psychoanalytic researchers. Increasingly, as I focused on issues of meaning, affect, emotion and the experience of potentially devastating ecological threats, I felt the need to conduct my inquiry in the field through interviews, ethnographic methods and direct contact with human participants. Ten years later, and with apprehension, I found myself standing on the edge of the Fox River in Green Bay, Wisconsin, gazing out at the imposing paper mill that had so radically changed the ecologies and the lives of thousands in the region. There I set out to conduct a psychosocial, social science research study focused on in-depth interviews with 10 participants.

## Researching Affect and the Environment

My inquiry revolved around how people *experience* chronic, potentially destabilizing ecological issues – affectively, unconsciously – and how these

experiences inform social, political, cultural and ideological practices. I use the term *experience* to refer to psychic and social, individual and collective processes (Althusser, 1972; Walkerdine *et al*, 2001). Experience, in this context, suggests the presence of affect, however much these eco-industrial issues may be inchoate, outside representation. That is, the felt, visceral sensations of knowing our ecological systems are threatened or in decline, and our health is at risk. *Experience* suggests more than belief, values, opinion or attitude – markers that continue to define and dominate contemporary environmental psychology analyses.

I believe there are traumatic affects associated with these issues. I have, however, chosen to focus, for now, on *anxiety* and *loss* as central affective dimensions of these issues. This emphasis, as I discuss later, arose directly from the interview data.

My first challenge was how to determine whom to interview and how I would locate the participants. Through the Biodiversity Project, the host for my fellowship, I contacted a local market research firm in Green Bay. My contact, a fellow qualitative researcher, was enthusiastic about the study and generously allowed me to design a web-based survey to send to their Green Bay-based database. In the survey, I included a range of short-answer questions and demographic data to allow myself to assess “levels of engagement” based on the literacy in local and global ecological issues, activities and media consumption, how often the respondents thought about environmental problems, and so on. From a group of 366 respondents, I chose five men and five women who, on basis of their self-assessments, seemed neither oblivious nor engaged.<sup>1</sup>

I conducted three in-depth interviews with each of the 10 participants. I used a methodology largely informed by the work of Duncan Cartwright’s (2004) “Psychoanalytic Research Interview” and related work in psychoanalytic qualitative research methods (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Walkerdine *et al*, 2001; Hoggett, 2006; Frosh, 2007). I was curious to explore how the interviewees managed their awareness of the issues, biographical experiences and current circumstances as long-term residents of Green Bay. Secondarily, I was interested in how the survey and interview data might correspond. Given the overwhelming reliance on polling and survey methods to inform how environmental engagement, attitudes and perceptions are gauged, I wanted to explore (even in this small “sample”) how well the survey data matched up with the interview findings.

### **Environmental Ambivalence and Melancholia**

In Green Bay, I confronted contradictions between industrial progress and ecological health. At the core of any serious degradation, there often are fruits that we tend to enjoy. Thus a rarely acknowledged, fundamental ambivalence

and contradiction is arguably at the heart of ecological damage. Without explicit acknowledgment, this conflict tends to become internalized (“Why am I not doing more to save or protect the environment?” or “If I really cared, I’d do more”). Environmental discourses skirt the issues through parallel narratives of catastrophic loss and idealized solutions (see Randall, 2009).

I sensed this ambivalence and contradiction during my time in Green Bay, a living museum of industrial progress. Strolling the historical district and appreciating the grand Victorian architecture, I was aware of the ever-present stack of the mill on the horizon and my own difficulty breathing at times. While I exercised on the newly created “Fox River Health Trail,” I noted the irony of doing pull-ups against the backdrop of cranes, coal piles and utility buildings. I marveled at the peacefulness of the pastoral surroundings, as my guide informed me of the severe threats to water quality, deep beneath the soil, posed by the farms that dotted the hillsides. I had gone to Green Bay ostensibly to explore environmental anxiety; what I experienced and heard in the interviews was more akin to deep ambivalence and conflict, tinged with loss and melancholia. This deep ambivalence does not show up in the polls or surveys, as people are often forced to self-select from a menu of opinions or attitudes regarding environmental issues or valuation – our methods rarely accommodate the “tangle” of competing or potentially contradictory feelings, thoughts and desires.

The ambivalence and what I interpreted as potential melancholia surfaced repeatedly in the research interviews. It was evident that the participants were experiencing complex feelings, thoughts, desires and concerns regarding their local environment, particularly those relating to water and air quality but also extending to climate change issues as well. Underlying their narratives was a palpable sense of loss. But it was not clear to me (and perhaps to the participants themselves) *what* was being mourned. Stories of growing up and playing in the water, and associations with specific family members or friends, seamlessly flowed into narratives of the present experiences of the water as degraded or threatened. I often left interviews feeling drained, but without clearly understanding why. My field notes reflected both my sense of sadness in response to some of the narratives and my frustration – primarily toward the environmental discourses that consistently position subjects (such as my participants) as lazy, uncaring or apathetic. What I heard instead were narratives of profound affective investment in the region, reflected in nostalgic recollections of family visits to the beach, associations between beloved relatives and particular parks or riverbanks, and memories of specific traumas linked to the river, such as an accident or a parent’s job loss from the mill.

I heard in the interviews a mixture of affection, disgust, disdain, pride, disappointment and love for the region and its troubled ecologies; these shifting sentiments and expressions surfaced within a single sentence, within an hour, or across the three hours of interviews. Such shifting discourses raised a

methodological question: how does one codify narrative analysis when the topics are shifting? In other words, the temptation to provide a coherent, linear narrative plot line or analysis was defied by the nonlinearity of the data. Associations with particular environmental sites (dunes, the river, Lake Michigan, an uncle's dock) were complicated by the confluence of past and present, associations with specific objects (uncle, mother, father, siblings), context (being an adolescent, the experience of freedom, growing up, loss of innocence, survival), and proximity to the issues in the present (risk of contamination, association with danger, sadness or loss, local political dynamics).

When I returned to the UK to conduct my analysis, I realized that, while I was keenly interested in the anxiety surfacing in the data, I also found narratives of loss, celebration, affection and resignation. For example, a 53-year-old man who grew up on the river and spent his entire childhood swimming in the river (this is a polluted industrial river), referred to himself as “apathetic”; and yet he spent hours talking about his love of the water and his emotional attunement with the river and the seasons. As he detailed his reasoning for not becoming involved in any environmental advocacy or protection activities, he, at the same time, expressed a high degree of environmental literacy and his chagrin at the degradation of this place he loves. Another participant, a woman in her mid-50s, told me that, when she moved to Green Bay, her children developed sinus infections and she had questioned the decision to buy a home in an agricultural area facing water threats (due to the concentrated animal farming operations, CAFO). Yet she was clearly proud of her home and her ability to raise a family with strong “family values.” Describing a vacation in a nearby resort area on Lake Michigan, she recounted how the region reminded her of a simpler, more romantic time. At the same time, she described her phobia of large bodies of water, a fear she links to an early childhood memory of a picnic along a river and her mother's intense fear that she might drown.

### **Mapping as Data Analysis**

I positioned my project as an environmental psychoanalytic investigation, in that I was primarily interested in object relations, *including* environmental or nonhuman objects. I was also keenly interested in the interplay of conscious and unconscious processes. Toward this end I became sensitized to narratives, plot lines, key “protagonists” or object relations, attachments and affect throughout the interviews. I began to rely on an object-relational psychoanalytic framework to structure the analysis. The work of Klein, Winnicott, and Bollas offered key concepts for my work, specifically in attuning to how certain objects, memories, and stories contained multiple meanings. I referred extensively to Cartwright's (2004) psychoanalytic research interviews and his suggestions to pay attention to plot lines, characters, and internal object relations; as mine was also an

environmental study, however, I wanted to incorporate the *physical* object world into the frame. Rather than approach the data by segmenting and coding specific keywords, I wanted to chart graphically how certain memories, places and things presented certain affective relations and associations. I also had undertaken intensive training in Biographical Interpretative Narrative Methodology (BNIM) in 2007 with Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne and had been inspired by both the idea of following the gestalt of the narrative as “footsteps in the snow” and their method of “chunking the data.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, I had been exploring Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) Free-Associative Narrative Interview methodology and was interested in the “pen portraits” they used in the early stages of data analysis.

Bringing together aspects of these influences, along with my deep commitments to psychoanalytic thought, I began a mapping exercise of objects appearing in the data, both environmental and human (the Fox River, Lake Michigan, boat, a childhood book, sand dunes, holiday home, siblings, father, and so forth), and associations and relational contexts. I then placed these maps alongside the affective themes emerging from the data. For example, for each participant I generated a map of specific environmental “objects” as they arose in the narrative data – boats, dunes, a specific park, family member, book, and so on. I marked specific phrases and associations with these objects, to detect lines of connection or meaning. For one participant, a resort area (mentioned earlier) might be associated strongly with her partner and a special romantic holiday, nostalgia for the past (how it reminded her of her younger self); but, emerging in the third interview, was also a strong fear of large bodies of water, going back to a memory of her mother’s terror of the children drowning at a family picnic on some cliffs. The Fox River for another participant could be associated with childhood autonomy and discovery, relaxation, or swimming, or with illness (contracting hepatitis) and pollution. The mapping illustrated how nothing about these “objects” was straightforward or fixed.

Mapping created a series of dimensional “portraits,” revealing narratives about the participants’ relationships among places, environmental issues, and biographical histories. Tracing out specific stories, objects, memories, and people, I could help make visible the less clear lines of associations and affect to create an image. The goal was not to construct a linear narrative but, rather, to surface and make visible the ruptures, dilemmas, emotions, conflicts and lived experiences associated with the environment. I was then able to tease out several affective themes that had become clear – notably loss, mourning and guilt. This recognition led me to conceptualize environmental threats – ideological, political, civic, social and ecological formations – as leading to a form of *melancholia*. An environmental melancholia may be evidenced as a form of static, idealized relations with specific places, which have since become degraded and yet for which reparative energies are not yet mobilized. A loss seemed to have registered, but the nature of this loss is less clear. Is it loss of one’s self in relation to the more pristine water, the water itself, or the idea of the

water and its associations? It became increasingly difficult to separate out these elements. Understanding environmental engagement thus required considerably more than understanding values, attitudes, behaviors, or even demographics; it required the capacity to recognize and allow for contradictions, ambivalence, and perhaps most important, the nature of loss.

### **Beyond the Gap**

The concept of the “gap” between what people report that they value or care about and what they actually do value is prevalent in the environmental psychology field, advocacy, and green marketing.<sup>3</sup> It is often articulated as an “attitude–behavior” gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002), “value-action” gap (Blake, 1999) or as a “paradox” (Jamieson, 2006; Leiserowitz, 2007).<sup>4</sup> The “gap” is confounding for those working in advocacy, green marketing or campaigning, or consumer behavior analysis around sustainable lifestyles; the data suggest an actual gap or disconnect between what people profess in the surveys, polls and interviews and what they actually do. It could be argued that what I was observing in my interview data was a reification of a “gap,” as participants clearly displayed high levels of concern, care, anxiety and investment in the very issues they were not participating in repairing or addressing.

As I comment at length elsewhere (Lertzman, 2012; forthcoming), the construction of a “gap” does not make sense when viewed through the lens of psychosocial research and analysis. A psychosocial framework, such as the one I used, helps to surface complications and nuances that illustrate the workings of ambivalence and mourning, identifications, affiliations, and other linked internal and social processes. The “gap” becomes more like a “tangle” of anxieties, fears, losses, anticipations, and desires. An understanding of what may be complicating agency – in this case, direct engagement with environmental issues – is hardly straightforward. As tempting as it might have been to speculate that people’s inaction on behalf of the Great Lakes is due to paralysis caused by anxiety (my initial theory), it seems possible that caring or reparative impulses are potentially arrested or thwarted in several ways. These may include issues concerning identity (“I am not an environmentalist; I don’t do that sort of thing”), forms of affective withdrawal and resignation (“There is nothing I can do anyhow”), and more manic defensive responses to anxiety (“I am too busy; I can only do what I can”).

Often I was able to detect lines of continuity between childhood experiences and identity formations with adult modes of responding to the environment, that is, the need to survive and press on during difficult circumstances and not to complain. Such a need was based on a harsh immigrant experience or the experiences of parents who had survived a war-torn Europe. Thus what appears as “apathy” takes on many forms and colors, shapes and expressions: all suggesting strongly that, in fact, rather than there being a “lack,” there may be

a “surplus” of affect – quiet loss, sadness, or a reinvestment of reparative energies in one’s own immediate sphere, such as diet, drinking water, or the clothes one wears. I found Winnicott’s (1963) work on the basis of concern – linked to the child’s capacity to experience her own destructiveness and desires for creativity and reparation – to be ultimately affirming and productive for thinking through the inertia gripping many of us on these urgent, vital issues. In fact, care, creativity and concern do exist. We need to find strategies for supporting and facilitating these energies.

Undertaking small-sample, in-depth data analysis is notoriously risky, a risk compounded by employing a psychoanalytic social science research framework (Cartwright, 2004). But these research approaches have potential riches to yield if we are careful, patient and conscientious. Taking the time, creating a space and context for mutual exploration, seems to honor the complexity and urgency of the issues. We are, in fact, embedded, and our ways of life (in industrialized, developed cultures) are imbricated in the practices we simultaneously enjoy, desire and seek to repair. Environmental dilemmas involve industrial and ideological dilemmas – but also, crucially, psychic and emotional ones as well. As Latour (1993) writes, “The ozone hole is too social and too narrated to be truly natural.” Indeed, environmental studies urgently need to weave into their discourses the recognition of human desires, fears, anxieties, hopes – not only what our attitudes, beliefs, values or opinions may be, or which smart device gets us to turn off the lights. Environmental dilemmas are ripe for deeper, more nuanced understandings and approaches; work that can incorporate conflict and anxieties; losses and melancholia; reparation, creativity and the desire to make reparation in the world. We are just beginning, but the field is now wide open.

## About the Author

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## Notes

- 1 Among the questions included was, “How often do you think about environmental problems, locally or globally?” on a scale of “never, occasionally, seasonally, depends on events, frequently.”
- 2 Interest in BNIM was sparked initially by the method’s expressed commitment (as articulated by Wengraf, 2001) to examining themes of embodied subjectivity, situated biographical analysis, and an

attention and sensitivity to narrative content. BNIM is a qualitative approach based on conducting in-depth interviews, with usually two interviews per participant. It is a method for both conducting interviews and for the data analysis and is expressly focused on “lived subjectivity.”

- 3 For example, a recent study published by OgilvyEarth (2011) articulates the so-called gap between action and values (or sentiments). See <http://www.ogilvyearth.com/thought-leadership/latest-research/>.
- 4 As Leiserowitz (2007) writes, “Thus Americans paradoxically seem highly concerned about global warming, yet view it as less important than nearly all other national or environmental issues. What explains this paradox? Additionally, why do some Americans see climate change as an urgent, immediate danger, while others view it as a gradual, incremental problem, or not a problem at all?” (p. 46).

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