Carl Graumann and the “Ecologization” of Psychology

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In July 2008, a symposium was held at the IAPS20 Conference in Rome to remember the work of Carl Graumann, an important and early figure in the development of environmental psychology. David Uzzell was asked to provide a tribute. This is an edited version of his presentation.¹

Gabriel Moser and I have been working on a long-term project collecting memories and accounts from the early researchers in the field of environmental psychology and people-environment studies. We have sought to find out who influenced the pioneers of the field and who in turn was influenced by them. We also asked them what they would like to be remembered for and what they think will be their legacy, especially in terms of their writing. We realised that the first generation of researchers would not be with us forever, and it is rare in the history of a discipline to be able to capture the thoughts and memories of those who lifted the initial tectonic plates of a new sub-discipline. Of course, we wrote to Carl. One of the last questions we posed was what papers would you like to be remembered for. Carl chose five:


What follows are some reflections on these writings for research on people-environment relations.

Reading Carl’s papers one gets a great sense of the past, the intellectual heritage and lineage of the philosophies and concepts which were so important to him. For example, he traced his ideas and interpretations of phenomenology not just back to Husserl but to Goethe. Goethe is primarily remembered as one of the foremost poets, dramatists and writers of the late 18th and early 19th century, but what is less well known is that Goethe had a keen interest in science. He was especially interested in clouds and entered into correspondence with a notable English scientist called Luke Howard, an early meteorologist and a Fellow of the Royal Society. Carl regarded Goethe’s open-mindedness and unprejudiced description and explanation of environmental phenomenon as the forerunner of the phenomenological approach.

Carl was able to stand back and set phenomenology in its historical context whether it was its spatial-political context as the subject moved from Nazi Germany to France, and the USA, or its disciplinary context where he discusses the origins of phenomenology in the writings of Husserl, Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty, Schütz and Berger and Luckman. As a PhD student in the mid 1970s these were the names that excited me and many of my fellow doctoral students. They are not heard so much now, having been replaced by Foucault, Bakhtin, Gergen, Potter, whose versions of discourse theory have sought to provide new ways of seeing and understanding social interaction, relations and sense-making. But for Carl, it was “phenomenologically oriented psychology that explicated the spatially and temporally articulated situation of the body subject, and that emphasised the experiential
meaning of places, distances, times and relations.” It is noteworthy that Carl includes time – so often time as a dimension in spatial and P/E relations is ignored.

Carl saw the interests of phenomenologists and P/E researchers complementing each other with

- the focus of phenomenologists on the recovery of the lifeworld, and
- the growing interest of P/E researchers in the discovery of the lifespace.

For Carl there was an indissoluble relationship between the experiencing person and the experienced world. This stands in contrast to the Cartesian dualism which lies at the root of the origins of psychology and which is still reflected in much of mainstream psychology, even social psychology. People should be seen as sense-giving agents, or as I usually express it meaning-making rather than meaning-taking actors. Such experiential intentionality occupies a place; it is situated and it is from where different perspectives are taken. If we want to change lifestyles, the everyday behaviours of people, the conditions in which people act and are forced to act, then the starting point must be the lifeworld in which people live, the taken-for-granted world.

“Taken for grantedness” is a term that has always intrigued me. And I think it intrigued Carl. It features in his second interpretation of the meaning of lifeworld. The everyday lifeworld is a taken-for-granted world. It is not so much the objective physical world to which people act/react but rather what they perceive to be the world. This should not imply that people are somehow naive or even psychotic. They may use quite sophisticated theories but these are expressed simply in order to understand and speak of the world. Carl refers to people’s simplified versions of psychoanalytic theory which of course immediately reminds one of Moscovici’s early work on social representations, and in Carl’s 1990 paper he specifically refers to Moscovici with reference to a paper on the human history of nature which dates back to 1977.

The phenomenological world is what people believe to be the “truth” and which is their motivation for action rather than some kind of objective world. This was the
starting point for my PhD and it was his kind of approach that was so influential in the 1970s, especially amongst geographers who, perhaps like psychologists, had found themselves sharing their discipline with colleagues whose view of the world was more informed by the natural sciences. An individualistic psychology as well as a psychology concentrating only on inner mental processes, is philosophically incompatible with understanding meaning-centred people-environment relationships.

Reading through a number of Carl’s papers I was struck by the relevance of the questions, issues, underlying themes and pre-occupations that run throughout his work such as his emphasis on people’s understanding of the environment, how it acquires meaning and how that meaning may initiate action. He talks too about the role of social interaction and social groups; that the environment is a social construction and that underlying that social construction is a communication process that may be part of the problem as well as the solution. Some of the papers I read were Carl’s reflections on the environment in the 1980s and 90s – he discusses catastrophic environmental episodes such as oil spills from tankers, explosions on oil rigs, radioactive emissions from Chernobyl. Today, our talk is of the bigger picture – climate change, global warming, food security. It would have been interesting to have heard Carl reflect on some of the discourses that are beginning to emerge on globalisation, climate change, equity.

In his paper on societal psychology, he begins by posing the question, what changed when nature was replaced by the environment? Nature was about the self-evident and reliable, something that linked us to our roots. But as we focussed on the environment this came to represent something altogether different, it represented a riskier world. This was about nature soiled, nature abused, nature as no longer the pristine. In environmental psychology it was about public perceptions – not of pristine landscapes but of landscapes occupied by nuclear power stations and despoiled by chemical waste, of water and air no longer fit for unfiltered consumption. It is interesting that at the very time there was a growing interest in the environment there was a parallel decline in the interest in nature/landscape in environmental psychology. While nature has seen a revival in recent years in the form of conservation psychology, this can’t be said for landscape research despite the fact that climate change will have a significant impact on our ‘taken for granted’
landscapes. More importantly, environmental and conservation psychology have not really taken on board the work of geographers such as Noel Castree (Castree and Braun, 2001) writing on the social construction of nature and the political implications of its construction.

Carl’s interests in what we might call environmental disasters extended not only to how they are interpreted and may be interpreted, especially by the media, but to rather larger questions that environmental issues like these pose, such as “what is the role of the individual within the context of the societal construction of the environment and of environmental risk and problems.” With the kind of forces which serve to alienate the individual from their surroundings such that they either feel powerless or not responsible for environmental degradation, he went on to say, “only in solidarity with other citizens does the individual have a chance to help the environment by gradually changing its social construction (1990, p223)”. Why is this not a strategy encouraged by government to address sustainability issues? Perhaps governments feel that encouraging people to act collectively may unleash a critical social movement over which they have no control. Interestingly Carl and Lenelis Kruse discuss the significance of the German Green movement in the 1970s as an example of the validity of Moscovici’s (1976) theory of social influence, in which they argue that social change is brought about not by majority pressure on minorities but rather the reverse. Minorities may start as dissenters, but gradually garner support, secure some political foothold and then find a constituency strong enough to enhance their power base. They argue that it was civil society forces such as these that were an important factor in the social construction of the environment. These groups started to offer an alternative perspective and discourse, not least of which one that sought to challenge the notion that continued economic growth at all costs should be a priority. Now no political party, national or international corporation will speak without extolling their green credentials, although environmental protection and social and economic equity and justice is little more than a branding opportunity within corporate social responsibility programmes and packages.

Carl was keen to talk about people-environmental studies rather than environmental psychology, and thus his writings have always had an affinity with the objectives of IAPS. I think it should be clear by now that what I find so stimulating about Carl
Graumann’s work is that the relationship between space, the environment and people is central. This ought to be one of the defining qualities of environmental psychology or P/E, but I am not so sure it always is. The environment is sometimes little more than a backdrop or setting denoting some contextual importance to an investigation of environmental attitudes, beliefs or behaviours. Unfortunately, the relationship of environmental attitudes and beliefs to socially constructed and socially enabled behaviours and space is not always clear. For Carl there was, to use his words, “an indissoluble meaningful person-environment relationship and transaction”.

References