



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

On the importance of qualitative research in environmental psychology

Ratcliffe, E.; Ogunbode, C.; Wilkie, S.; Jones, C.R.; Devine-Wright, P.; Uzzell, D.; ... ; Staats, H.J.A.M.

Citation

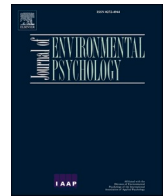
Ratcliffe, E., Ogunbode, C., Wilkie, S., Jones, C. R., Devine-Wright, P., Uzzell, D., ... Staats, H. J. A. M. (2024). On the importance of qualitative research in environmental psychology. *Journal Of Environmental Psychology*, 93. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102199

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3759892>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



On the importance of qualitative research in environmental psychology

ARTICLE INFO

Handling Editor: W. Schultz

In their 2022 (p. 3) editorial, Schultz and McCunn propose that JEPV “is not an outlet [...] for work that is purely qualitative in nature”. We write to express our concern at this statement. While we are pleased that qualitative research is still welcome in JEPV through mixed-methods studies, this policy risks diminishing the perceived value of qualitative methods alone. Qualitative research identifies novel phenomena and avenues of research (e.g., environmental self-regulation, [Korpela, 1989](#); birdsong and restoration, [Ratcliffe et al., 2013](#)), and sheds light on unquantifiable experiences (e.g., place meaning; [Manzo, 2005](#)). We argue that prioritising quantitative research negatively affects our understanding of human–environment relationships, especially among seldom-heard populations (e.g., children; [Brussoni et al., 2020](#)), and privileges Western, objectivist paradigms of knowledge production. We suggest that qualitative and quantitative methods should be seen as equally valid tools, each with their own standards of application and reporting, and with their own strengths and weaknesses, that can be used to address different types of questions.

We gather that reasons for JEPV’s editorial decision include concerns about generalisability, especially if qualitative studies involve small samples from a specific group or context (personal communications with the co-Editors-in-Chief, 5 September 2023). We believe this should not be misconstrued as a weakness of qualitative research, for three reasons.

First, small-sample qualitative studies can yield important insights about distinct, clinical, or minority populations, especially intersectional groups (see, e.g., [Rosati et al., 2021](#), regarding experiences of transgender refugees). Such studies remind us that we should not only seek to generalise but also to understand experiences *within* groups. People–environment relationships are influenced by their situatedness in particular geopolitical contexts and power relations. Qualitative approaches are less likely to reify and reproduce hegemonic understandings of the transactions between people and their surroundings (see, e.g., work regarding place by [Manzo & Pinto de Carvalho, 2021](#)). Favouring quantitative and/or behavioural research risks centering researchers’ worldviews and deprioritising participants’ lived experience, as expressed in their own language rather than that prescribed by the researchers.

Second, and linked to the point above, qualitative methods allow reflexivity about research practices and the nature of knowledge itself. There is increasing attention towards these topics in the context of critical environmental psychology, which seeks to challenge the

discipline’s prevailing biases and assumptions. As [Kühn and Bobeth \(2022, p. 8\)](#) note, “qualitative approaches are of high importance for critical research as they enable us to trace symbolic constructions of reality, which are the foundations for the actions of individuals and the formation of social groups.” Since quantitative research is largely situated within positivist and objectivist epistemologies, it tends to overlook the need for reflexivity that is required to support critical perspectives.

Third, qualitative methods are often employed by scholars who do not fit the normative view of who a scientist is (i.e., Western, male, senior-career, and able-bodied individuals; see [Pownall et al., 2021](#)). Excluding qualitative research from JEPV therefore systematically reduces opportunities for and visibility of these scholars. Furthermore, considering that much of non-Western, indigenous, and anti-colonial research methodologies tend to be qualitative, JEPV’s current position on purely qualitative research equates to a form of epistemic exclusion (see [Dotson, 2014](#)). It projects an unduly constricted vision of what ways of knowing are considered acceptable in environmental psychology as well as who is allowed to contribute to knowledge production in the field. Greater consideration needs to be given to the wider implications of ostensible attempts to make the journal more ‘rigorous’.

JEPV prioritises scientific study of psychological processes in people–environment relations ([Schultz & McCunn, 2022](#)). In reducing opportunities for qualitative submissions, we worry that such methods are framed as non-scientific or not relevant to psychological science. This risks conflating epistemological stance with scientific rigour, which is in contrast to wider approaches in psychology. The American Psychological Association (APA) and British Psychological Society set out clear standards for the reporting of qualitative research ([Levitt et al., 2018](#); [Shaw et al., 2019](#)). JEPV has previously included the APA standards in submission criteria ([van der Linden, 2019](#)). It is hard to understand why purely qualitative work should be deprioritised by the journal, so long as it conforms to those reporting standards.

[Schultz and McCunn \(2022, p. 3\)](#) note that JEPV is “a welcoming journal for interdisciplinary research”, but we argue that narrowing its methodological parameters will make it less, not more, attractive to researchers outside psychology. How can truly interdisciplinary and inclusive research be presented if researchers are limited in the tools permitted to produce publishable work? The increasing relevance of environmental psychology to diverse audiences and contemporary global issues, such as climate change, means that we should also

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102199>

Received 18 October 2023; Received in revised form 20 November 2023; Accepted 22 November 2023

Available online 25 November 2023

0272-4944/© 2023 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

prioritise diversity of perspectives, research methods, and methodological orientations (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Kühn & Bobeth, 2022; Patterson & Williams, 2005). This argument aligns with views set out in the IPCC Synthesis Report (2023, p. 32), which states that climate-resilient development will “[draw] on diverse knowledges and cultural values, meaningful participation and inclusive engagement processes— including Indigenous Knowledge, local knowledge, and scientific knowledge.”

We invite responses to this letter from the Editors-in-Chief and from the readers of JEPV.

References

- Brussoni, M., Lin, Y., Han, C., Janssen, I., Schuurman, N., Boyes, R., Swanlund, D., & Masse, L. C. (2020). A qualitative investigation of unsupervised outdoor activities for 10- to 13-year-old children: “I like adventuring but I don’t like adventuring without being careful”. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 70, Article 101460. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2020.101460>
- Devine-Wright, P., Pinto de Carvalho, L., Di Masso, A., Lewicka, M., Manzo, L., & Williams, D. R. (2020). “Re-placed” - reconsidering relationships with place and lessons from a pandemic. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 72, Article 101514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2020.101514>
- Dotson, K. (2014). Conceptualizing epistemic oppression. *Social Epistemology*, 28(2), 115–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>
- Korpela, K. M. (1989). Place-identity as a product of environmental self-regulation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 9(3), 241–256. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(89\)80038-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(89)80038-6)
- Kühn, T., & Bobeth, S. (2022). Linking environmental psychology and critical social psychology: Theoretical considerations toward a comprehensive research agenda. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 947243. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.947243>
- IPCC. (2023). In H. Lee, & J. Romero (Eds.), *Climate change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of working groups I, II and III to the sixth assessment Report of the intergovernmental Panel on climate change [core writing team]*. Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC. <https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647>
- Levitt, H. M., Bamberg, M., Creswell, J. W., Frost, D. M., Josselson, R., & Suárez-Orozco, C. (2018). Journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic, and mixed methods research in psychology: The APA Publications and Communications Board task force report. *American Psychologist*, 73(1), 26–46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000151>
- van der Linden, S. (2019). Editorial. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 61, A1–A4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2019.01.005>
- Manzo, L. C. (2005). For better or worse: Exploring multiple dimensions of place meaning. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 25, 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2005.01.002>
- Manzo, L., & Pinto de Carvalho, L. (2021). The role of qualitative approaches to place attachment research. In L. Manzo, & P. Devine-Wright (Eds.), *Place attachment. Advances in theory, methods and applications* (pp. 111–126). Routledge.
- Patterson, M. E., & Williams, D. R. (2005). Maintaining research traditions on place: Diversity of thought and scientific progress. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 25(4), 361–380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2005.10.001>
- Pownall, M., Talbot, C. V., Henschel, A., Lautarescu, A., Lloyd, K. E., Hartmann, H., Darda, K. M., Tang, K. T. Y., Carmichael-Murphy, P., & Siegel, J. A. (2021). Navigating open science as early career feminist researchers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 45(4), 526–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843211029255>
- Ratcliffe, E., Gatersleben, B., & Sowden, P. T. (2013). Bird sounds and their contributions to perceived attention restoration and stress recovery. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 36, 221–228. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2013.08.004>
- Rosati, F., Coletta, V., Pistella, J., Scandurra, C., Laghi, F., & Baiocco, R. (2021). Experiences of life and intersectionality of transgender refugees living in Italy: A qualitative approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(23), Article 12385. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312385>
- Schultz, P. W., & McCunn, L. (2022). Publishing in the journal of environmental psychology: Priorities and insights from the new editors-in-chief. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 81, Article 101824. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101824>
- Shaw, R. L., Bishop, F. L., Horwood, J., et al. (2019). Enhancing the quality and transparency of qualitative research methods in health psychology. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 24(4), 739–745. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12393>

Eleanor Ratcliffe*

School of Psychology, University of Surrey, United Kingdom

Charles Ogunbode

School of Psychology, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

Stephanie Wilkie

School of Psychology, University of Sunderland, United Kingdom

Christopher R. Jones

Department of Psychology, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Patrick Devine-Wright

School of Geography, University of Exeter, United Kingdom

David Uzzell

School of Psychology, University of Surrey, United Kingdom

David Canter

School of Psychology, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

Kalevi Korpela

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland

Laís Pinto de Carvalho

School of Psychology, Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana, Chile

Henk Staats

Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, Leiden University, the Netherlands

* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7XH, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: eleanor.ratcliffe@surrey.ac.uk (E. Ratcliffe).

Handling Editor: W. Schultz