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## On the importance of qualitative research in environmental psychology

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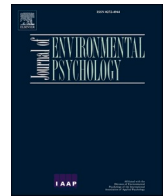
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## On the importance of qualitative research in environmental psychology

## ARTICLE INFO

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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

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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.

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