

# CHAPTER 1 NATURE & SCOPE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Environmental psychology is a specialised branch of psychology which is concerned with the relationship between human behaviour and the physical environment.

## Introduction

Environmental psychology is concerned with the environment's impact on people and the impact of people on the environment.

**Behaviour** in the environment can be:

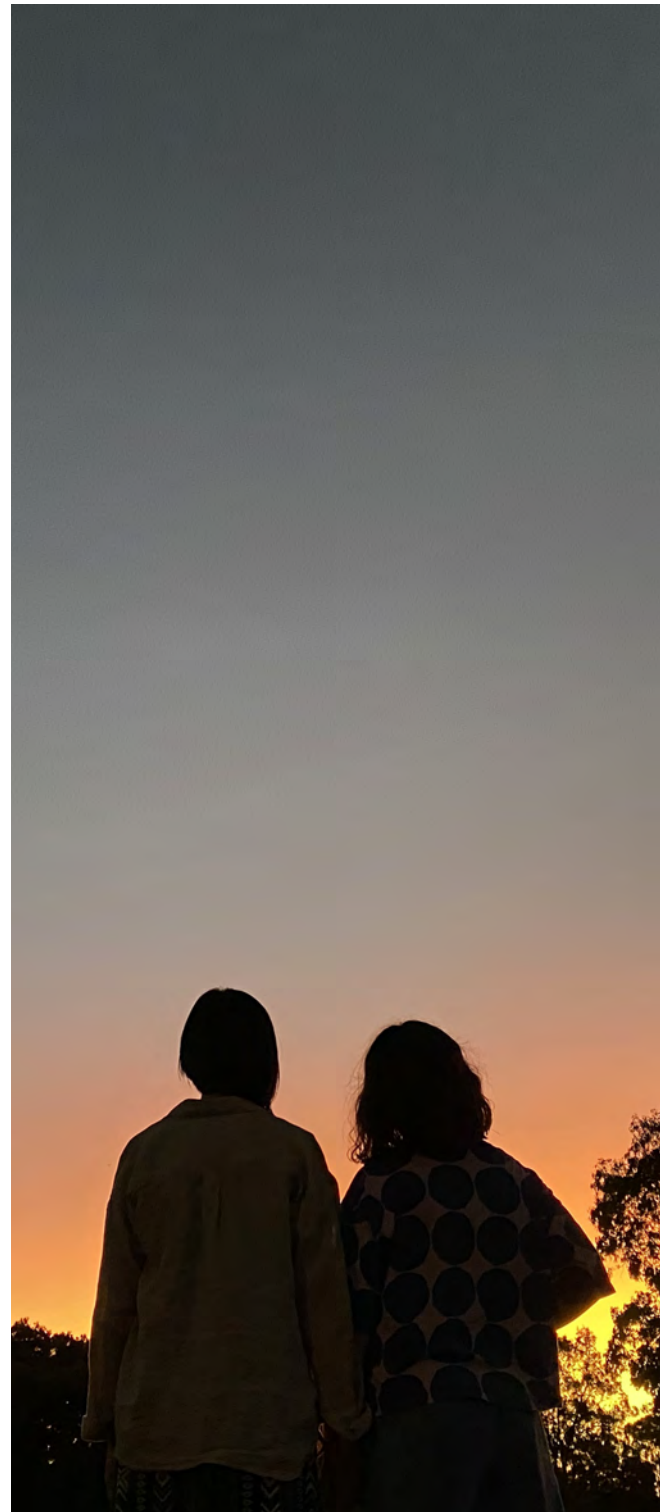
- Overt – this is observable behaviour, such as our actions like jumping, laughing, moving around.
- Covert – the behaviour that we cannot see, like our thoughts and feelings.

Environmental psychology tends to focus on the physical environment, including:

- Natural environment
- Built environment

However, the environment can also include our social environment. This includes our families, peer groups, friends, colleagues, etc. These influences have not been researched as frequently in environmental psychology.

As environmental psychology has evolved, the definition of environment has expanded to include learning and informational environments.



# Nature of Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology is regarded as an applied science. However, a significant amount of research in this field focuses on the development of theories, methods, and models.

The goal of environmental psychology is to enhance human wellbeing and improve the relationships between people and their environments. This includes managing natural resources and constructing better buildings and amenities which benefit mankind and the environment. These goals are achieved through observing the relationship between people in the environment (or simulated environments), creating theories, and applying findings.

In environmental psychology, people and the environment are considered holistically rather than as a collection of isolated stimuli. The environment affects the animals, insects, plants, and humans

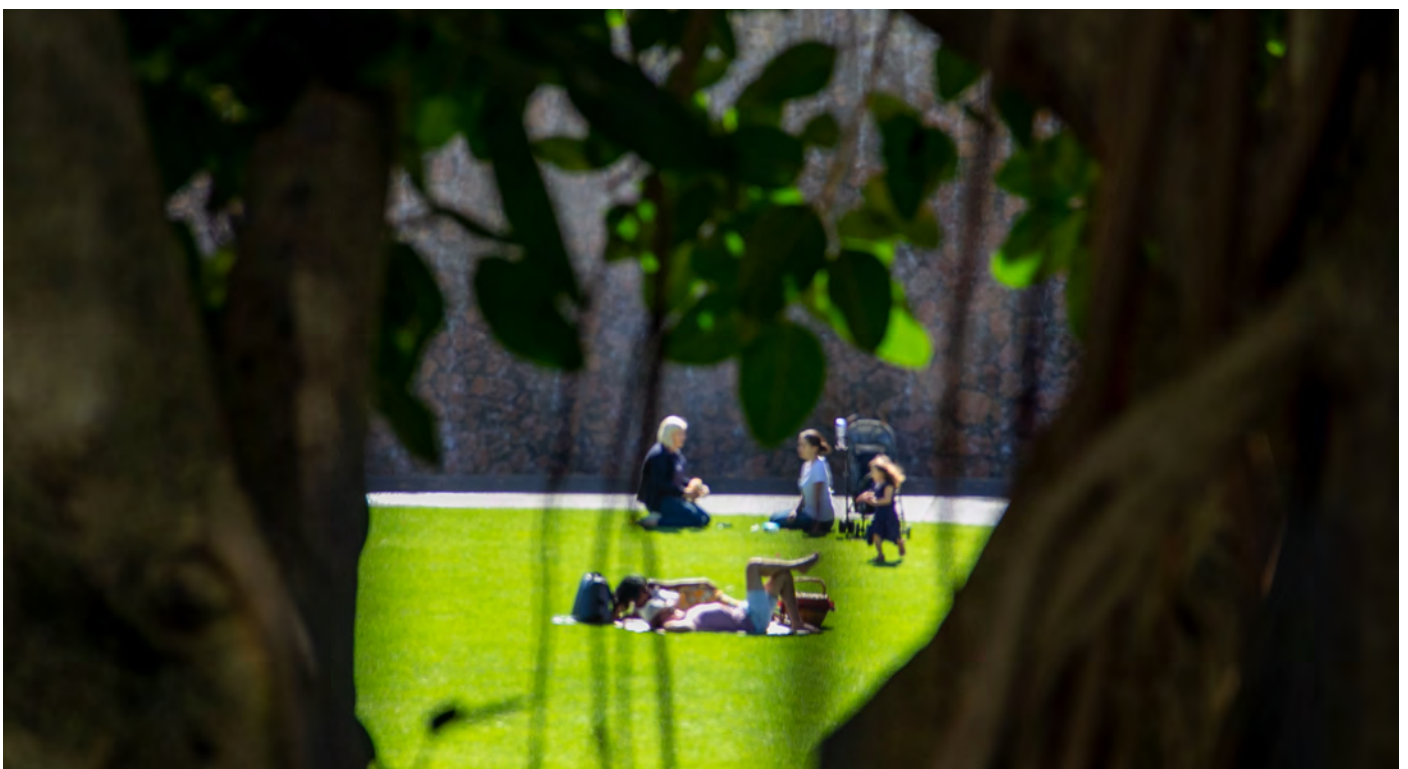
that are in it, but these same animals, insects, plants, and humans can affect the environment around them.

Environmental psychologists tend to work as part of an interdisciplinary team in conjunction with professionals such as architects, town planners, industrial designers, anthropologists, ecologists, conservationists, and environmentalists.

## Definition of Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology may be defined as:

*“An interdisciplinary subfield in psychology that draws from the data and theories developed in a variety of areas including social psychology, sociology, ethology, political science, architecture, and anthropology and turns them upon, as the name suggests, issues involving the complex interaction between people and their environments.”* (The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology)



## Origins of Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology was born in the 1950s and 1960s when researchers started to examine the effects of the built environment on people's psychological wellbeing. During this time, there were two differing views of the human-environment relationship. These two viewpoints can be summarised as follows:

- Behaviour was a result of the environment (particularly the built environment),
- Behaviour caused the environment (particularly the natural environment).

Today the relationship between humans and their environments is seen as transactional: we change the environment, and it changes us. This relationship is also regarded as context specific.

Some of the earliest research examined the effects of components of the environment on behaviour under laboratory conditions. These included the effects of:

- Light
- Pressure
- Heat
- Noise

However, these studies focussed on environmental components as discrete stimuli and did not replicate real life environments. For example, light studies did not include the impact of different light intensities but just isolated physical

stimuli. Although researchers did begin to acknowledge the significance of the environment in modifying behaviour, they tended to examine specific elements isolated from the environmental context.

The roots of modern environmental psychology began when researchers felt that the validity of laboratory research was limited, and they wanted to observe people in natural settings through field trials and real-world experiments. These researchers were particularly interested in spatial and physical aspects of the environment and their influences on behaviour.

### Pioneers - Lewin

Kurt Lewin (1951) sought to quantify the human relationship with the environment.

He proposed that Behaviour (B) was a function of the Person (P) and the Environment (E), where P and E are interdependent variables. This could be expressed in the following formula:

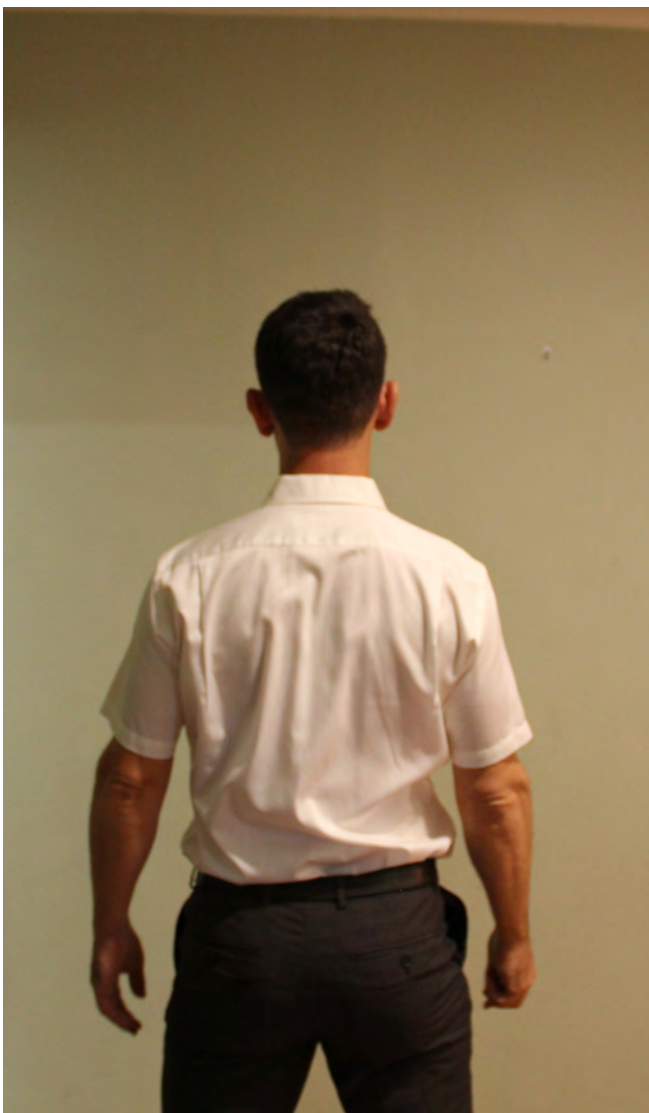
$$B = f(P, E)$$

In an experiment, we have dependent and independent variables. Dependent variables are what we are measuring. Independent variables are those that can affect or manipulate the dependent variable.

For example, a group of students are asked to learn a poem. Group A learns it in silence while Group B has loud rock music playing during their study period. The experimenters then see if the noise affects recall. In this example, the independent variable is the noise, the dependent variable is the recall of the poem.

In the field of environmental psychology, researchers might carry out an experiment to see if bright lights and loud noises affects the speed of packing in a warehouse. The dependent variable would be speed of packing, the independent variables would be noise and light.

Although Lewin focused on the social environment, he viewed environment as a whole entity rather than just considering isolated elements under controlled laboratory trials. This holistic view of the whole environment became the prevailing position within environmental psychology, and the beginnings of the transactional-contextual approach.



## Pioneers - Prochansky

The origins of environmental psychology as a distinct and recognised field of enquiry are often attributed to Prochansky and his colleagues at the City University of New York. This group of social psychologists carried out research into people-place relationships in 1958. They were tasked by psychiatrists to identify the best hospital room layouts for patient health. Being unable to provide a definitive answer led them to further research and the establishment of environmental psychology as a new discipline.

## Pioneers - Baker

Originally a developmental psychologist, RG Baker was disillusioned with psychology's fixation on laboratory research. He set up a field laboratory to make real world observations of children's everyday behaviours. He felt there was a great need to promote more naturalistic studies because laboratory findings could not be used to demonstrate how laws apply to real life situations or account for environmental variables.

## Problem Orientated

Environmental psychology has a problem-orientated research focus because it is concerned with finding solutions to person-environment problems. Solutions can be used to make societies better places to live in. Problems which come under scrutiny in environmental psychology must be real life problems, and not ones created in artificial laboratories. The understanding of the problem itself must also arise directly from the problem's source.