

The Ecological Perspective : Streetwalking

Robert J. Gregory

*School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
Fax : 64 06 3505673, E-Mail : R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz*

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ABSTRACT By walking down a main street in a town with several different specialists, one quickly learns that one environment can be viewed from highly divergent perspectives. Such specialist views are essential to understanding, but extremely limiting in that much is omitted. Holistic viewpoints gained from pooling what specialists "see" and appreciation of "others" who are different are extremely valuable concepts and practices, whether considered culturally, socially, occupationally or otherwise.

Generalization and specialization are central issues in human ecology. A general or holistic viewpoints, in which understanding that various components or parts are interrelated, is essential to ecology and ecological thinking. Specialists, by virtue of their training, outlook, activities, and thinking, focus on parts, and not the whole. Accordingly, specialists miss the big picture, the frameworks or meta-views in which parts reside. Gaining a holistic view or an ecological perspective is useful to those who are specialists, those who are caught up in their particular discipline, and children.

The following experience offers insight into ecologically based perspectives and a method for teaching others about holistic views.

THE EXPERIENCE

In my role as a researcher with a mental health program, I walked down the main street of my community with the psychiatrist who was my employer and supervisor one day some time ago. As we strolled along, he pointed out some of the people walking by, and shared with me his insights about their character, their problems, and for a couple of them, a bit of non-confidential information about their personal history. I worked closely with this psychiatrist subsequently and we talked about the observations he made, the various diagnostic categories he used,

the way in which stresses affected people and their presentation and behaviour, and the effects of lifestyles of the people we saw.

In this particular walk a few people greeted him as we walked. For me, being new in town, I could only nod, or greet them when introduced. I did not have their history, nor the point of view the psychiatrist held. The walk was interesting, for he was most perceptive about the people we met.

At the conclusion of our walk, the psychiatrist and I entered a local main street business and met the proprietor. I was promptly invited to walk with the business person to the bank at the other end of the same main street, while the psychiatrist went on his way for another errand. As we walked along in other direction along the same main street, the business person explained to me about each business as we passed store fronts. "This one was profitable and that one was not," he claimed, and then told me the reasons and rationales why. The customers were many for this particular shop, and yet, not for that business. This shopkeeper was tidy, and frugal, that one was overspent, and another was bankrupt. She talked about the change of businesses over the years on this street, and the impact of the shopping mall on downtown.

Later in the week, it just happened that I had the opportunity to trod the same street with an architect. He pointed out cornices above the buildings, the construction patterns used during various historical times, and the physical characteristics of each building. He remarked about the choices of materials used in construction, the durability of the buildings and their inner spaces - how the internal environments were suitable or not, any why.

Still another time, I worked with the police in a mental health training exercise. Sure enough, one night I walked the same street with

a police officer, as he was busy checking store fronts and observing. The police officer noted a window that did not look quite right, and we studied it up close. There were faint marks on the glass - someone had surreptitiously used a glass cutter to score the glass - but it was not broken. "Yet," said the officer. He decided to put a "watch" on the store, and we moved along silently to a telephone so that he could alert his commander. Another store had been held up a week before, and the officer described the action, and the result. Bail and freedom for the accused, and insurance money for the storekeeper. We passed a pub, and he entered, looking for suspects, illegal activities, and drunks. None were present, so we moved along, observing with suspicion and concern the various locations all along the street.

And yet again, I had an opportunity to stroll along with one of my clients from my mental health work. She had been a "junkie", or heroin addict. To support her habit, she "worked" this main street. She pointed out the strategic locations for "hooking", or meeting "johns", the nearest pathways to various hotels, and the best route for a hasty escape if need be, from either the police or from a "mark" who was suspicious, hostile, or evil. She pointed out how a pedestrian or a car driver could cruise along and seek her services. And she showed me where she used to buy heroin, then where she would go to shoot up.

All these events occurred, right there on the one main street of my community. The street during these observation did not change, but remained the same. The observations, however, were almost entirely different, each from every

other. Each of my walking partners had their own and very unique point of view. I listened to each, and respected the specialist knowledge that each had of their environment, which it turned out, was exactly the same environment. Although the locale was similar, their views were highly divergent, their specialist knowledge was entirely different, and their language, was also peculiar to their profession.

From my walks down the main street, I became aware about how important a holistic view can be. Every discipline, every profession, every group, has its own view and special awareness. Each is valuable in its own way. But for me, putting the good parts together and maintaining a holistic or over view was the best of all. Integrating the parts was not a simple matter, but with awareness and care, I could even begin to accomplish that.

The same idea can be offered for cultural differences. Each culture and way of life has strengths and values which make sense to those who live by them. None has the final word on what is best for all people at all times, however.

As an ecologist, or as an aware and holistic thinker, you too can choose to be sampler and take the best from many possibilities. You can also integrate these parts into a coherent whole that works for you as a way to understand, or to adhere to one chosen way of life and live it to the fullest, while also appreciating that there are many ways in which to live and see the world. But, like the walks down the street, each and every profession and culture has perspectives, views, values, weaknesses and blind spots. and strengths. we can learn from one another.