

Social ecology: Lost and found in psychological science

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including political systems, economic systems, and even climate and geography—can affect our thinking and behavior, a field of study known as socioecological psychology. In a report in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, psychological scientists Shigehiro Oishi and Jesse Graham from the University of Virginia examine the impact of social and physical environments on human thought and behavior.

A society's economic system may have long-reaching effects on its citizens' behaviors, beyond how much money they can make. Research suggests that willingness to cooperate with others depends on the economic system in which individuals live in: In an economic game, participants from a whale-hunting society (in which cooperation is important for survival) were more likely to exhibit cooperative responses than were participants from a horticultural society (one in which cooperation is not critical).

However, the relationship between economic systems and behavior goes in the other direction as well—the mind and behavior can influence economic systems. For example, nations high in general trust have more subsequent [capital investment](#) and economic growth than nations that are low in general trust.

Climate can also have an influence over the mind and behavior. Studies have shown that violent-crime rates are higher during warmer months compared to colder months. Research has also suggested that prosocial

behaviors are affected by the weather: In one study, pedestrians were more willing to help a survey interviewer on sunny days (in both summer and winter) than they were on cloudy days.

In the history of [psychological science](#), there have been several waves of socioecological research, each having a distinct focus. "However," write Oishi and Graham, "sustained attention to current and chronic macroenvironments has not been widely recognized in psychological science." In recent years, the rise of cultural [psychology](#) has emphasized cultural factors in basic psychological processes—investigating culture-specific meanings and practices—but less attention has been paid specifically to socioecological factors.

The authors note that taking socioecological perspective on psychology research could be extremely useful to the field and can present a complimentary perspective to cultural psychology and evolutionary psychology. They observe that the "socioecological approach to psychology offers testable hypotheses not only concerning cultural differences but also concerning individual and regional differences in the phenomenon under study."

Oishi and Graham conclude by suggesting some ways that researchers can begin adopting a socioecological approach to their work, for example, by considering distal factors (e.g., weather, population density) that may impact proximal factors such as mood and beginning with informed curiosity to generate hypotheses about cultural or regional differences and looking to features of the environment to identify the origin of those differences.

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