

Environmental Psychology Inspired by a Planned City



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“You must be out of your mind!” was the standard reaction of friends and colleagues upon hearing that we would transfer from the Federal University of Paraíba to the University of Brasília, in 1988. From living 200 m from the beach in one of the oldest, historic cities in Brazil, João Pessoa, PB, to the then 28 years old capital, Brasília, then and even today, a construction site.

While few people who did not actually live in Brasília had little positive to say about the city, permanent residents, by and large, appeared to like living there – a contrast sufficiently instigating for an empirically working social psychologist to start a mail survey among residents about the quality of life in Brasília. The layout of the residences was rational as to allow a random selection of addresses. At the time we only had a small office space at the university, hence we used a P. O. Box address and the name, “Laboratório de Psicologia Ambiental” (Environmental

Psychology Research Group, EPRG) on the pre-paid return envelopes. The 23% return rate allowed for the conclusion that the majority of those answering liked the city, especially those living in that part of the city, where urbanization was already under way (Günther & Flores, 1995).

This initial study led us to investigate living in Brasília from the perspective of the four dimensions of the rational urban design as postulated in the 1943 Charter of Athens – housing, work, leisure and circulation (cf., Gold, 1998). Given that architects appeared to either venerate or despise Oscar Niemeyer, “the architect” of Brasília, this empirical approach, i.e., asking the actual users, the residents of the city, was not conducive to making friends at the School of Architecture. As the research grew, reciprocity was of the essence: To the extent that we attracted students interested in studying behavioral aspects of Brasília, that we were using Brasília as the paradigmatic object of behavior—environment studies, the P. O. Box virtual laboratory acquired some real space.

From the beginning, our strategy had been to attract students with the motto, “You can study any topic within environmental psychology, as long as it concerns some aspect of Brasília or the University of Brasília”. This would apply to term papers in Environmental Psychology, to undergraduate research participation projects, to M.A. thesis and to Ph.D. dissertations. Furthermore, given the nature of the field, we accepted a wide variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, from small scale experimental, to observations and surveys. And in keeping with the ethos of the Institute of Psychology, students followed various theoretical outlooks, from experimental analysis of behavior to clinical.

In the course of the past, nearly 30 years, there were two important milestones that impacted on the direction of the LPA, the first, interaction with Traffic Psychology, and the second, with Developmental Psychology.



TRAFFIC PSYCHOLOGY

A discussion among the members of the EPRG in early 1996 led to focus more on the circulation dimension of the planned city of Brasília. An early study (1989-90) had dealt with reasons for and against bicycle use. The extension of the city and the precarious nature of the public transportation system, especially as it concerned service for the university community, lead us to studies of the bus system; not just another study of complaints by the users, but about the situation of the bus driver – stress, lack of respect from employers and from users (cf., Silva & Günther, 2004). Another attempt was participatory research with middle school children: rather than studying them, we tried to involve them in studying the traffic situation around the school and their “chauffeur” — not surprisingly, parents did not appreciate being monitored by their children, and this project had to be abandoned. Yet the interest in circulation and mobility continues until today. While traffic psychology is one of the job options for students with a professional degree in psychology, that is, psychological testing of candidates for driver licenses, there is little empirical research on traffic being done by psychologists (cf., Günther, H., Cristo, Neto, & Feitosa, 2015). Our empirical approach to the field of traffic psychology from the perspective of analyzing the behavior—environment relationship was innovative and not always well received by representative of the traditional, subjective and test oriented traffic psychologist.

As a spin-off of these circulation / mobility studies, we undertook studies in helping behavior, inspired by the stereotype of Brasília being an unfriendly city due its artificiality. Our data did not support this perception (c.f., Silva & Günther, 2001).

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

After a very stimulating sabbatical at the Children’s Environment Research Groups at City University of New York in 1997, my wife Isolda Günther, with a degree in developmental psychology, formally joined the EPRG, and ever since we have conducted a number of studies together. The life course



perspective became important in the research efforts of the group. While the EPRG had been looking at the four environmental dimensions of Charter of Athens, now we provided a transverse perspective via the life span phases as well, i.e., young children, adolescents (c.f., Günther, I., 1996, 2001; Günther, I., & Günther, H., 1998; Günther, I., Nepomuceno, Spehar, & Günther, H., 2004) adults, and older people (c.f., Macedo, Oliveira, Günther, I., Alves, & Nóbrega, 2008).

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The merging of the dimensions of the Charter of Athens and the life span perspective is, of course, supported by ecological psychology. A first test of this merger occurred when the EPRG participated in a public competition to submit proposals for the re-vitalization of the W3 Avenue in 2008. Early in the short history of Brasília, this avenue constituted the major shopping street. With the advent of shopping centers and shifting traffic patterns, W3 deteriorated. Using an ecological approach to develop a proposal, i.e.,

building on what existed, interviewing different user groups, such as store owners, clerks, shoppers, children, students, residents of all ages, our proposal included a “culture mile” for the southern part of W3 (actually, closer to 6 km), given that in the near neighborhoods there are a number of important high schools, cultural institutions maintained by the local government, and the British, French, German, Spanish and U.S.A. cultural institutes. By adding opportunities and incentives for art galleries and cafés, the quality of life of the area, and the W3 Avenue might have been revitalized sustainably. The fact that one architect and eleven environmental psychologists won first prize in this nation wide urban competition may have contributed to the fact that nothing came out of the proposal and W3 continues to deteriorate.

While there is a certain insistence on the part of Brazilian funders to follow well-defined research lines for research groups, we consciously avoided this strategy. On the one hand, environmental psychology

was, and to some extent continues to be, little understood in Brazil, varying in the public and academic social representation between “tree huggers” and systematic, scientific research, which psychologists are not really expected to do, especially when it involves quantitative methods. However, the EPRG participated actively in the larger Environmental Psychology Research Group as part of the National Association of Research and Graduate Programs in Psychology (Günther, H., & Pinheiro, 2008). From this involvement resulted a number of important books in Portuguese, which contributed to an academic recognition of the field in Brazil, both inside and outside of Psychology (e.g., Cavalcante & Elali, 2001, 2018; Günther, H., Pinheiro, & Guzzo, 2014; Tassara, 2005). Most notable, among these publications, is a manual on research methods in the field (Pinheiro & Günther, 2008).

At the moment, members of the EPRG participate in two major international research projects: *Healthy Urban Mobility and Place-Making with Older Adults*.



HEALTHY URBAN MOBILITY

Healthy Urban Mobility aims to “understand the impact of personal (im)mobility on both individual and community health and wellbeing in different neighborhoods in Brazil and in the UK, and explore the potential for participatory mobility with local communities to support and develop healthy urban mobility”. In the project, we use a mixed methods approach, “including spatial mapping, large scale social surveys, in-depth biographic interviews, mobile interviews with go-along methods, and participatory approaches involving the local community in identifying problems and solutions for healthy urban mobility and community wellbeing”, as stated in the funding proposal.

The research is being conducted in three Brazilian cities: Brasília, Florianópolis and Porto Alegre, and one UK city: Oxford. Hartmut Günther, based at the University of Brasília is the Brazilian principal investigator in this international research project involving researchers of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Federal University

of Santa Catarina. Tim Jones, based at Oxford Brookes University, is the UK principal investigator.

PLACE-MAKING WITH OLDER ADULTS

Place-Making with Older Adults: Towards Age-friendly Communities aims to establish and compare how older adults from different social classes, in different urban and cultural contexts construct sense of place; that is, it tries to identify opportunities, challenges, facilitators and barriers to social participation, being active and engaged in the community. The strategy used is to capture everyday routines, mobility and walkability, as well as access and use of community resources. Methodological approaches include surveys, semi-structured interviews, go-along, photo diaries and participatory mapping.

This international research project involves researchers at three UK universities, with principal investigator, Ryan Woolrych located at Heriot-Watt University, and others at Dundee University and Manchester Metropolitan University. On the

Brazilian side, the principal investigator, Adriana Portella, is located at the Federal University of Pelotas, and others at the University of Brasília and the Federal University of Minas Gerais.

It should be noted that both research projects are not only multi-site, but also multi-method and multi-approach.

In the *Healthy Urban Mobility* project participate architects, an epidemiologist, a geographer, psychologists, and urban planners. In the *Place-Making with Older Adults* project, there are architects, an engineer, a geographer, psychologists, a public health specialist, sociologists, a social worker, tourism & hospitality specialist, and urban planners.

“Great oaks from little acorns grow” – from a virtual laboratory with a P. O. Box address to a real research group; from a small mail survey of the quality of life in a new city, to research involving colleagues from institutions in Brazil and abroad. And always keeping with the all-encompassing spirit of studying person-environment relationships.



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