Embodied Permaculture: Phenomenological Exploration of Human-Nature Interaction

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1 Introduction

Permaculture is a holistic approach with a set of universal ethics and ecological principles, most often used as a tool for designing regenerative and sustainable systems and environments. It has also been regarded as a process that encourages its practitioners to develop an emotional and personal connection to nature and expand their imagination and creativity (Morel et al., 2024).

Permaculture has thus been primarily studied as a design and sustainability practice, with limited attention to its experiential and meaning-making dimensions. Existing research has focused mainly on the social, ecological, or economic benefits of practice, although there are some rare cases of self-experimental and phenomenological studies that emphasize the added individual value for its practitioners.

This study aims to expand the existing literature on permaculture and human-nature interaction by using a first-person approach to explore an embodied and immersive part of the practice. It does so by examining how the permaculture approach shapes the structure and qualities of the experience of the practitioners during work with nature (e.g., building with natural materials, composting, tending to the garden).

2 Methods

The study will be conducted qualitatively, using semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022) to illuminate how the permaculture framework itself shapes how practitioners make sense of and attend to their experiences in addition to the structure of the experiences. To deepen the phenomenological richness of the data, IPA interviews will be anchored by the micro-phenomenological interview technique (Petitmengin, 2006), which guides participants through a detailed retrospective exploration of specific lived episodes.

The sample will consist of 3–5 permaculture practitioners engaged in daily land-based work. Participants are expected to have a minimum of two years of experience to ensure that the practice has become sufficiently habitual and to establish a shared experiential ground. Participants will be recruited from permaculture communities and farms, where hands-on land work is central to their daily experience. The small sample size will allow for deep and meaningful engagement with individual accounts.

3 Results

The analysis is expected to provide a set of experiential themes describing the structure and qualities of embodied permaculture engagement with nature, as well as the meaning-making role of permaculture ethics and principles. Themes will first be developed idiographically for each participant and later examined across cases, with convergences and divergences between individual accounts treated as analytically meaningful in their own right.

4 Discussion

The study aims to contribute to the dialogue between cognitive science and environmental psychology by highlighting the experiential dimension of permaculture practice that is mostly overlooked. Reliance on retrospective self-reports and a small sample size limit generalizability.

References

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