

ECOSYSTEM HEALTH AS AN APPROACH IN HEALTH STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Ecosystem health constitutes a relatively recent theoretical-methodological approach and has gained increasing prominence in research involving health and the environment over the past few years. **Objective:** This article aims to present and discuss, based on a bibliographic literature review, a current overview of ecosystem health, as well as other emerging approaches associated with the topic. **Methods:** A bibliographic search was conducted in databases regarding the proposed topic: ecosystem health as an approach in health studies. **Results:** In Brazil and regarding the “value of the environment,” issues such as education, health, housing, and other topics related to the quality of life and collective well-being of the population are far from an optimal effectiveness panel. Ecosystem thinking introduces a new discipline called ecosystem health, which seeks to identify ecosystem management strategies for the participatory construction of integrated solutions that promote improvements in health and living conditions. Concepts and updates in this field aim to explain the terms Earth health, topophilia, biophilia, and symbiocene. Ecosystem health and mental health seek to understand, in the scientific literature, disorders such as depression and anxiety and their correlations with the environment. Environmental gerontology is conceived as the field dedicated to describing, explaining, and optimizing the relationship between older adults and their socio-spatial surroundings. **Conclusion:** It is expected that this brief discussion contributes to the dissemination of knowledge about some theoretical foundations of ecosystem health and its new perspectives.

Keywords: Health; Environment; Comprehensive Health.

INTRODUCTION

Ecosystem health constitutes a relatively recent theoretical-methodological approach and has gained increasing prominence in research involving health and the environment in recent years. Along with this advancement, there is a need for a greater understanding of the theoretical foundations of ecosystem health and an update on its scope and contexts (BUTLER; FRIEL, 2006; LERNER; BERG, 2017; MERTENS, 2007).

This article aims to present and discuss a current overview of ecosystem health, as well as other emerging approaches associated with it. It was observed that ecosystem health approaches, although recent, have various discussion niches that will be addressed throughout this article.

METHODOLOGY

A bibliographic search was conducted in databases regarding the proposed topic: ecosystem health as an approach in health studies. The research was divided into five subtopics: Brazil and the “value of the environment,” ecosystem thinking, concepts and updates in ecosystem health, ecosystem health and mental health, and ecosystem health and environmental gerontology.

RESULTS

Brazil and the “Value of the Environment”

Today we live in a society built to sustain the capitalist system, where issues related to quality of life and the collective well-being of the population are far from an optimal effectiveness panel. The economic historian Polanyi (2012) emphasizes that “the motivations of human individuals are only exceptionally determined by the needs of material desire-satisfaction.” Therefore, population health becomes a non-priority, as it is not characterized as a material good. Even without having such a value, health—or the lack thereof—generates economic consequences in society.

Ecosystem Thinking

Since 1986, evidence demonstrating the links between health and environmental factors has considerably strengthened, stimulating a new discipline sometimes called “ecosystem health,” which seeks to identify ecosystem management strategies for the participatory construction of integrated solutions that promote improvements in population health, living conditions, and ecosystem sustainability (BUTLER; FRIEL, 2006; LERNER; BERG, 2017; MERTENS, 2007).

Concepts and Updates in Ecosystem Health

In 1949, Aldo Leopold wrote about the land ethic and created the concept of "Earth health," which introduced discussions in environmental science regarding ethical ways to view and understand the environment from a less anthropocentric and more ecocentric perspective (ALBRECHT, 2019).

Developed by the Chinese geographer Yi Fu Tuan in 1974, topophilia can be understood as the feeling of identity and attachment to place, which goes far beyond

the material object of geographic space itself; it involves a more intimate relationship, including cultural and mental health dimensions (TUAN, 2015).

Edward Wilson, in 1984, developed a new concept, biophilia, defined as “the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes.” The biophilia hypothesis proclaims a human dependence on nature that extends far beyond mere material and physical sustenance to also encompass human desires for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction (ALBRECHT, 2019; KELLERT; WILSON, 1995).

The concept of the Symbiocene, created by Albrecht (2019), emerges as an antagonistic alternative to the Anthropocene, not only conceptually but also emotionally. The term is formed by combining the roots of the words “symbiosis” (meaning interaction or association among different species) and “cene” (meaning an era or historical series) (ALBRECHT, 2019).

Ecosystem Health and Mental Health

While seeking to understand, in the scientific literature, disorders such as depression and anxiety and their correlations with the environment (NIEUWENHUIJSEN, 2022; JIMENEZ et al., 2021), climate emergencies are eliciting a range of other unnamed psychological disorders. Meteorological anxiety is a subset of eco-anxiety associated with climate vicissitudes and has already been observed in some studies in Europe, with heatwaves and major meteorological changes occurring unexpectedly (PERKINS-KIRKPATRICK; LEWIS, 2020). According to Albrecht (2019), even though meteorological anxiety is a type of multifaceted disorder, it still lacks sufficient study and attention; as climate instabilities increase, people tend to exhibit more of these symptoms.

Ecosystem Health and Environmental Gerontology

When evaluating older adults, it is necessary to consider the natural physiological changes of aging and to view them integrally, considering not only biological aspects but also the psychological and social conditions involved (World Health Organization, 2005). Environmental Gerontology is conceived as a field dedicated to describing, explaining, and optimizing the relationship between older adults and their socio-spatial

environment. As a multidisciplinary field, it draws contributions from various sciences (BATISTONI, 2014).

CONCLUSION

It is expected that this brief discussion contributes to the dissemination of knowledge about some theoretical foundations of ecosystem health, its new perspectives, and related approaches that have used ecosystem health as a guiding framework. Although this article observed that these discussions are still in an initial phase—that is, in the process of naming what is observed but not yet described in the literature—it is hoped that these discussions will serve as guidance for new research in ecosystem health.

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