

ARTICLE

Joining forces between health and environmental psychology: Report on the 2024 SYNERGY Expert Meeting

Daniella Watson and Laura M. König

Abstract

This article summarises the 2024 SYNERGY Expert Meeting held at the European Health Psychology Society conference, which brought together health and environmental psychologists to advance the emerging field of environmental health psychology. The meeting aimed to foster collaboration, integrate theories and methods, and develop joint interventions addressing climate change. Discussions highlighted shared principles, complementary approaches, and the urgent need for interdisciplinary action. Five key recommendations were proposed to sustain momentum: co-authoring papers, attending environmental psychology conferences, hosting online meetings, applying for joint grants, and guest lecturing. This unified approach promises impactful research and interventions that promote sustainable behaviours and improve health outcomes.

Key words: Environmental health psychology, climate change, behaviour change, Expert Meeting

Why was an Expert meeting between environmental and health psychologists convened?

This paper provides a summary of the Expert Meeting on Environmental Health Psychology. The Expert meeting was, held during the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) 2024 conference, hosted by the EHPS Synergy Board and the Special Interest Group (SIG) on Equity, Global Health and Sustainability. The annual Synergy Expert Meeting aims to foster collaborative discussions among health psychologists researching key areas within their field. In 2024, health psychologists and environmental psychologists came together with the goal of unifying the field of environmental health psychology.

Health psychologists have been advocating for our discipline to shift our efforts into climate change mitigation and adaptation since 2008 (Nisbet and Glick, 2008). As Bernard and Chevance (2023) simply put it, “We, as a community, have little time left to meaningfully contribute to climate change mitigation”, and that it really is “a race against time”. Health psychologists have called upon their community to apply their expertise in behaviour change to the climate crisis (Bernard and Chevance, 2023), to teach course on integrated health psychology and planetary health/climate change models (Bernard, 2019; Papies et al., 2024), and even leverage our proactive EHPS community to share and accelerate learning (Bernard and Chevance, 2023).

Nielsen et al (2021) also emphasises the endorsement by The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to encourage psychologists to become part of the integrated scientific effort. Health Psychologists are not the only psychologists working on efforts to tackle the climate crisis. Both environmental and health psychologists focus on understanding how people interact with their environment and encourage actions that promote climate mitigation and adaptation (Inauen et al., 2021b; Papies et al., 2024). However, there has been limited collaboration between these two sub-discipline to date. Inauen et al (2021a) made the case for environmental health psychology, emphasizing that the two sub-disciplines could compliment each other’s synergistic work by holistically understanding human behaviours and their impact on the environment and on health, selecting appropriate theories and methods from both sub-disciplines, and also developing systematic behavior change interventions.

What was the purpose of convening?

Dr Nadja Contzen, Prof Jutta Mata, and Prof Lorraine Whitmarsh took this a step further and organised a much needed Expert Meeting on ‘Research Synergies for the Future: Advancing Environmental Health Psychology’. Nadja, Jutta and Lorraine uniquely invited environmental psychologists to the Synergy Expert Meeting hosted at European Health Psychology Society conference (2024) in Cascais, Portugal, to facilitate the fostering of exchanges and learning opportunities between these two sub-disciplines. Key objectives included discussing the latest theories and methods, identifying synergies for collaboration, addressing current practices and research needs in environmental health, developing a research agenda, and building a network of like-minded psychologists. How hard can that be? We are all psychologists after all.



Fig. 1. Group photo of participants at the 2024 SYNERGY Expert Meeting.

How do environmental and health psychology complement and enhance each other?

Steg and de Groot's (2018) introduction to environmental psychology outlines four principles: 1) human interaction between build and natural environment, 2) interdisciplinary collaboration, 3) problem-focused approach by putting theory into action and 4) diversity of methods. In the oral history of health psychology (Quinn et al., 2020), similar principles also are reflected, such as interdisciplinarity, theory-driven evidence and practice, and diverse methods and the focus on human behaviour. As you might expect from sub-disciplines of psychology, human behaviour is at the core. Environmental theories tend to place human behaviour as influenced by the build and natural environment (Winkel et al., 2009), whereas health psychology has traditionally focused on more internal individual factors such as motivations, attitudes, and behavioural intentions (Davis et al., 2014). It would be important to work with theories from both sub-disciplines to truly capture how the natural and built environment affect the motivations, attitudes, and behavioural intentions of individuals in response to the climate crisis.

Both sub-disciplines design, implement and evaluate interventions that targets behaviour change in the short and long term, with co-beneficial outcomes for health and sustainability such as active mobility (Inauen et al., 2021b) and refraining from ultra-processed red meat (Mata et al., 2023). They also share the desire to ultimately influence policy to ensure that efforts are implemented at scale (König and Araújo-Soares, 2021). One difference between the two disciplines is that interventions designed by environmental psychologists normally target multiple behaviours such as 'pro-environmental behaviour', whereas health psychologists often target single behaviours such as goal-setting for sustainable diets. Both have merit, and can be useful to understand pro-environmental behaviours and climate actions on a higher level, which can be further unpacked by health psychologists such as using behaviour change taxonomies (Michie et al., 2013; Kok et al., 2015) to understand more specific behaviours.

How to continue the partnership and grow the environmental health psychology approach?

Collaborating together in partnership is the most efficient way to be working on time-sensitive climate research and actions. We encourage our sub-disciplines to find opportunities to meet and collaborate, for example, through a publication resulting from discussions at the Expert Meeting but more can be done. We outline five action point, based on the discussions in the Expert Meeting, to continue the important partnership between our sub-disciplines:

1. **Collaborate on papers.** The environmental psychologists and health psychologists who attended the Synergy Expert Meeting, are co-authoring a paper based on the sharing of each sub-disciplines' strengths and opportunities together, to set a research

agenda.

2. **In-person meetings.** As environmental psychologists attended the Expert Meeting on our home turf at EHPS, it is only fair that health psychologists also attend environmental psychology conferences such as the International Conference on Environmental Psychology. In June 2025, five EHPS members from the SIG on Equity, Global Health and Sustainability attended the conference in Vilnius, Lithuania. Conferences are a great opportunity to meet many environmental psychologists in person and also learn about research from different psychological perspectives.
3. **Online meetings.** To reduce our travel carbon footprint, online meetings can serve as an alternative to in-person gatherings. These virtual meetings are most effective when there is a shared purpose, such as collaborating on a paper, applying for a grant, or working on a joint project. Online meetings should only be used if necessary as they also have their own carbon footprint.
4. **Apply for joint grants.** Combining our theories, methods and interventions is crucial to accelerate psychology's impact on the climate crisis, and therefore we need joint projects. Applying for grants together can forge research projects, develop PhD student proposals or secure secondments between research teams. For example, EHPS has the Innovative Initiatives Grants "to support collaboration across EHPS countries and members in their research endeavours". This could be a useful opportunity for health and environmental psychologists to continue working together.
5. **Guest lecture.** When embedding planetary health and climate change models into your teaching, invite an environmental psychologist to guest lecture to encourage your students to learn from a different perspective which also role models to the students to collaborate with environmental psychologists in the future. And vice versa, health psychologists can guest lecture on environmental psychology courses to emphasise the health impacts and behaviour changes.

In conclusion, the Expert Meeting on Environmental Health Psychology marked a pivotal moment for fostering collaboration between environmental and health psychologists. The vision for the future is clear: to create a unified approach that leverages the strengths of both sub-disciplines to address the climate crisis effectively. By integrating theories, methods, and interventions from both fields, we can develop comprehensive strategies that promote sustainable behaviors and improve health outcomes. The next steps include co-authoring papers to set a research agenda, attending each other's conferences to facilitate in-person exchanges, organising online meetings to continue the dialogue, applying for joint grants to fund collaborative projects, and inviting guest lecturers to enrich educational programs. These actions will ensure that the partnership between environmental and health psychologists continues to grow, ultimately leading to impactful research and interventions that address the urgent challenges posed by climate change.

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Daniella Watson works at the Climate Cares Centre, Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London, United Kingdom.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6353-7495.
Email: daniella.watson@imperial.ac.uk
Website: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniellawatson/>



Laura M. König works at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Austria.
ORCID: 0000-0003-3655-8842.
Email: laura.koenig@univie.ac.at
Website: <https://gesundheit-psy.univie.ac.at/>