ELSEVIER

Journal of Environmental Psychology 27 (2007) 293–309

Journal of ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

www.elsevier.com/locate/jep

Place experience, gestalt, and the human–nature relationship

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Available online 6 August 2007

Abstract

This paper explores some ways in which differing views about the human–nature relationship reflect and are reflected in people's experiences of the places and environments they encounter in their lives. I first describe how ideas of humans being "part of" versus "apart from" nature have appeared in discussions of environmental ethics and management, and suggest how these contrasting views might relate to people's actual experiences of the natural and human aspects of places. Using qualitative survey responses about outdoor places in the midwestern USA to illustrate ideas from phenomenological and gestalt psychology, I show how a sense of the human–nature relationship is conveyed in the gestalt qualities of places and how this may give rise to a feeling of moral responsibility toward nature. I conclude that the experience of human and natural aspects of real places points toward a dialectical view of the human–nature relationship, in which humans can be seen as simultaneously "part of" and "apart from" nature.
Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Gestalt; Phenomenology; Place experience; Special places; Nature

1. Introduction

In this paper, I explore how ideas about humans being "part of" or "apart from" nature relate to people's experiences of the places and environments they encounter in their lives. In debates over environmental ethics and management these two contrasting ideas often appear as dichotomously opposed statements about the character of the human–nature relationship. Viewing humans as being either part of nature or separate from nature in a fundamental sense, however, may not be consistent with how places and environments are actually experienced. Exploring how configurations of human and non-human features in real places evoke varying impressions of the human–nature relationship might point us toward more realistic, less simplistic ways of thinking about this relationship.

Ideas drawn from phenomenology and gestalt psychology may prove especially helpful in doing this. In what follows, I employ Fuller's (1990) account of a phenomenological psychology based on gestalt theory as a framework for understanding place experience. Using examples from qualitative surveys about outdoor places in the midwestern USA, I show how a sense of the human–nature relationship is conveyed in the gestalt qualities of places; how this may give rise to a feeling of moral responsibility toward nature; and how it implies a dialectical view of the human–nature relationship in which humans can be seen as simultaneously part of and separate from nature.

1.1. Concepts of the human–nature relationship

People's judgments about the acceptability of different kinds of human activity in natural environments often seem to stem from an underlying sense of how humans are (or ought to be) related to non-human nature. This question is sometimes framed in terms of a contrast between two basic views. Simplistically stated, these are "people are *apart from* nature" and "people are *part of* nature." The first of these two statements represents a belief that human beings are somehow different or separate from the natural world. This view implies that since humans are not part of nature, the presence of people, their artifacts, and their activities necessarily must diminish the naturalness of an environment. The second statement represents the belief that human beings belong to the natural world and cannot be set off from the natural

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0272-4944/$ - see front matter Published by Elsevier Ltd.
doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2007.07.001

systems with which they interact. Since, in this view, nature includes human beings, it would seem that there is no reason to view human influence, activities, and artifacts as incompatible with natural environments.

Debates over resource management and environmental ethics are sometimes framed in terms of a dichotomy between these contrasting views, with proponents of one management philosophy criticizing other approaches for inappropriately either separating humans and their artifacts from nature or including them in nature. For example, Cronon (1995) attempts to discredit the concept of wilderness preservation by arguing that wilderness is a social construction that wrongly treats people as separate from nature and that conflicts with the historical and ecological facts of human involvement in ecosystems. Katz (2000), on the other hand, seeks to discredit the concept of ecosystem restoration by arguing that restored ecosystems are human artifacts, fundamentally different from natural systems. Katz warns that by blurring the distinction between nature and artifact, ecosystem restorationists may be undermining efforts to protect genuinely natural environments from development and degradation.

Arguments framed in terms of these opposing views implicitly assume that the moral stance people take regarding their behavior and responsibilities toward nature stems from their beliefs about humans being either part of or separate from nature. Schultz (2000) has investigated this assumption empirically. He hypothesized that the type of concern individuals have for the environment depends on the degree to which they view themselves as being part of the natural environment. He found that people who see themselves as more connected to nature score higher on measures of biospheric (i.e., non-anthropocentric) concern and lower on measures of egoistic (i.e., utilitarian) concern with respect to environmental problems.

Schultz assumes that viewing humans as separate from nature entails believing that humans are exempt from the laws of nature and superior to other forms of life (Schultz, 2002; Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004). This is, however, only one of several possible ethical views that would be logically consistent with a sense of separation between humans and nature. Another possibility is that nature could be viewed as pristine and transcendent, morally and aesthetically superior to humans and needing to be protected from their corrupting influence. Conversely, the belief that humans are part of nature could be used as a justification for modifying or destroying landscape features to suit human purposes, since in that view a human-modified landscape could still be considered natural. Thus, a general conceptual distinction between being "part of nature" versus "separate from nature" by itself does not uniquely determine a moral position toward the environment.

Schultz (2002) found that different cultures vary in the degree to which they regard humans as part of nature, but he notes that differences also exist between individuals within a culture. He suggests that believing oneself to be included in nature is not a fixed disposition, but may be influenced by situational and environmental factors (Schultz et al., 2004). For example, people who live in large cities and are distanced from the natural world in their daily lives might come to see themselves as less connected to nature (Schultz, 2001). Schultz (2000) also speculates that a person's sense of inclusion in nature is malleable and might increase over time through visiting places and engaging in activities that foster a sense of connectedness with nature. These observations suggest that concepts of nature and how humans are related to it ought to be examined in the context of the actual environments and places that people experience in their lives.

1.2. The human–nature relationship in the context of place

Much has been written over the last several decades about place experience, sense of place, place attachment, and related topics. This literature is spread over several disciplines and employs diverse methodologies. General reviews and overviews of various aspects of the place literature can be found, for example, in Seamon (1982, 1987, 2000), Low and Altman (1992), Williams and Stewart (1998), Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels (2003), Bott, Cantrill, and Myers (2003), Farnum, Hall, and Kruger (2005), and Patterson and Williams (2005). The multifaceted and complex character of place experience is a prominent theme in this literature.

Depending on where people live and travel, they may find themselves in places that are predominately designed, constructed, and used by humans; places that are largely free of human activity and influence (i.e., "natural"); or places that contain a combination of human and natural characteristics and features.[1] The concepts of humans as part of nature or as separate from nature suggest different possibilities for how people might experience these different kinds of places. For example, a sense of being separate from nature might suggest that a person would feel out of place or like an intruder in a predominately non-human, natural setting. A sense of being part of nature suggests that a person might feel at home or have a sense of belonging in a natural place. In places that have a mixture of human and natural elements, an impression of humans being separate from nature might arise when the human aspects of a place are experienced as contrasting or conflicting with the non-human aspects, while an impression of humans being part of nature might occur when the human aspects of the place are experienced as harmonizing or merging with the natural aspects.

There is no *a priori* reason to assume that these different ways of experiencing the human and natural aspects of

[1] In using the words "human," "non-human," and "natural" to describe places and their features, I am simply referring to the fact that some features of places are a result of human activity and some are not. I do not mean to imply a fundamental dichotomy between humans and nature. Also, I do not rule out the possibility that a place may have features and characteristics that are not clearly classifiable as either human or natural.

places are mutually exclusive. The same person might experience them all in different places at different times, or perhaps even in the same place at the same time. In people's lived experience of the configurations of human and natural features that occur in real places, the distinction between being "part of" versus "apart from" nature may be more of a transitory, context-dependent perception than an over-arching worldview. Thus, rather than reduce people's beliefs about the human–nature relationship to predefined, dichotomous categories of "part of" versus "apart from", it may be more useful to ask how a sense of inclusion, separation, or other form of relationship actually shows up in a person's experience of a real place or environment.

1.3. Phenomenological and gestalt perspectives

Perspectives from the fields of phenomenological psychology and gestalt psychology may be especially useful in pursuing this question. Phenomenological psychology (Keen, 1975; McCall, 1983) uses a qualitative, descriptive approach to understanding and interpreting how people experience the things, situations, and meanings that they encounter in the course of their lives. Seamon (2000) characterizes this approach as a form of "radical empiricism" in which the investigator seeks to know the essential qualities and patterns of a phenomenon through direct experience and involvement with it. This is a challenging task because the fundamental structures and patterns of our life in the world are usually lived implicitly, without being conceptualized and understood in explicit terms. In our daily lives we make countless, automatic assumptions about "the way things are," and seldom pause to question whether these assumptions in fact provide a consistent and authentic account of our experience. The goal of phenomenology is to see beyond or beneath this "natural attitude" and gain a more accurate and genuine understanding of the patterns of our involvement in the world.

Keen (1975) identifies the "physiognomy of the field" as one of the basic structures of experience to be addressed by phenomenological psychology. Physiognomy refers to the overall organization of the perceptual field as experienced in a particular place and time. It includes a person's (perhaps implicit) sense of how space is structured and of the kinds of pushes and pulls it exerts on behavior. A study by Hull, Robertson, and Kendra (2001) provides an example of how the overall physiognomy of a landscape might be related to an impression of humans as part of or separate from nature. People living near a National Forest in the eastern USA characterized their local landscape as one that was natural and that also contained valued elements of human culture. Hull et al. (2001) refer to this landscape character as "cultured naturalness." In such a landscape, the human elements appear to be an integral part of the natural landscape, but respondents indicated that this depends on the human elements not dominating or modifying nature to the extent of ruining it. Thus, an increase in the number or the intrusiveness of human features could change the overall physiognomy of the landscape to produce an impression of humans in conflict with nature instead of included within it. The Catalonian landscape described in a phenomenological study by Nogué i Font (1993) provides another example of a cultured natural landscape, in which a "person-nature equilibrium" (p.169) has been maintained over many generations.

Gestalt psychology (Koffka, 1922, 1935; Köhler, 1959; Wertheimer, 1938) may also be able to contribute insights into how the human and natural aspects of outdoor places relate to each other within a person's experience of a place. Gestalt psychology views perception and other mental processes as holistic rather than atomistic in nature. That is, complex perceptual and cognitive patterns are grasped in their entirety as integral wholes (gestalts), rather than being pieced together from simpler sensations or "atoms of experience." A musical melody, for example, is not simply a summation of the individual notes that it contains. The melody is given in experience as a whole, and the character of each individual note is determined by its place within that whole.

Gestalt psychology originated as a reaction to reductionistic schools of psychology such as structuralism and behaviorism, and had considerable influence on subsequent developments in various areas of psychology, including environmental psychology. Ittelson, Proshansky, Rivlin, and Winkel (1974) trace the influence of gestalt psychology on the study of environmental perception and behavior via the work of gestalt-influenced theorists such as Lewin (1951), Barker (1968), Brunswick (1956), and Gibson (1966). Gestalt notions, with their emphasis on the holistic character of experience, have clear relevance to environmental perception and experience. For example, studies of landscape aesthetics have shown that qualities such as the fittingness of buildings within a natural environment (Wohlwill & Harris, 1980) or the coherence (i.e., presence of order and a clear organization) of a landscape scene (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) are important determinants of landscape preference. These qualities, involving the perceptual organization of a setting and the interrelations of its parts, can be seen as aspects of the overall gestalt of the setting.

Historically, gestalt psychology and phenomenology have had significant points of contact and mutual influence. For example, the gestalt psychologist Metzger was influenced by Husserl (the founder of phenomenology), and the phenomenologists Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty studied and made use of gestalt theoretical concepts in their work (Graumann, 2002). Parallels can be seen between gestalt theory and current phenomenological approaches to the experience of place in the fields of environmental psychology, geography, and design. Seamon (1979), for example, characterizes environmental phenomenology as striving for a holistic view of place, in which the various parts of environmental experience are understood

as reciprocally related to each other and to the larger geographical whole to which they belong. He describes the phenomenological essence of place as "a psycho-social-environmental whole larger than the sum of its parts" (Seamon, 1987, p. 20)—a description that echoes the classical definition of a gestalt.

Alexander's (2002) phenomenological account of the role of order and wholeness in the design process also has parallels with gestalt theoretical concepts. He catalogs a set of 15 basic structural properties or patterns found in both nature and human design that give rise to a life-enhancing sense of coherence and harmony. In a somewhat similar way, Tuan (1974) also describes basic structures or schemata, such as binary opposition and centers, that underlie environmental experience and enable people in different cultures to experience their world as an orderly whole. These efforts to identify basic formal properties that give rise to the experience of wholeness and order are reminiscent of gestalt psychologists' attempts to identify laws of organization that account for the formation of perceptual gestalts (Wertheimer, 1938).

Recent interest among environmental phenomenologists in the scientific work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is further evidence of common ground between the gestalt and phenomenological viewpoints. Goethe has been identified as a forerunner of phenomenology and an exemplar of a phenomenological approach to natural science (Bortoft, 1996; Seamon & Zajonc, 1998). At the same time, Goethe has also been claimed as a predecessor of gestalt psychology (van Campen, 1994). Goethe's approach to science involves ideas of wholeness and of the interdependence of the whole with its parts (Bortoft, 1996; Riegner, 1993) that parallel the psychological concept of a gestalt.

Like the phenomenologists, the gestalt psychologists insisted that psychological phenomena should be accurately observed and described as they actually appear within experience, undistorted by *a priori* assumptions about their nature. In doing this, they challenged the conventional belief that complex, experiential wholes could be understood by disassembling them into their constituent parts. Unlike the phenomenologists, however, the gestaltists attempted to explain the holistic qualities of perception and cognition in terms of neural processes taking place in the brain. The gestalt psychologists' view of reality was dualistic—consisting of a subjectively experienced, phenomenal world on the one hand, and a "transphenomenal" or objective physical world on the other (Köhler, 1966). The link between these two worlds was assumed to lie in patterns of activation of brain tissue arising from the organism's sensory contact with the external environment. Rejection of this dualistic separation between subjective and objective realms is a key feature that distinguishes phenomenology from gestalt psychology and from Western science in general.

Fuller (1990), in his book, *Insight into Value,* has undertaken to reinterpret gestalt psychology from a phenomenological perspective. Synthesizing gestalt concepts with the philosophy of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Fuller seeks to overcome the subject/object dualism inherent in the original formulation of gestalt theory and to employ gestalt principles to explicate the human phenomenon of value. Given the historical connections of gestalt theory with phenomenology and environmental psychology, as well as the parallels between gestalt concepts of order and wholeness and phenomenological notions of the holistic character of place, Fuller's non-dualistic formulation of gestalt concepts seems potentially useful for understanding how human and natural features are related to the overall experience of a place as a whole. In the remainder of this paper, I will describe some of the key points in Fuller's phenomenological rendering of gestalt psychology and what they imply regarding the experience of place. To illustrate how human and natural aspects of place may interact in conveying a sense of the human–nature relationship, I will draw upon a set of qualitative descriptions of outdoor places from surveys I have conducted in the Great Lakes region of the midwestern USA.

2. Qualitative place surveys

A summary of the qualitative place surveys is given in Table 1. The surveys were conducted over a period of 15 years. Each survey was conducted in cooperation with agencies or organizations concerned with resource management in a particular geographic area, with the purpose of providing input on people's experiences of special places to management planning and decision making currently under way in that area.

2.1. Data collection methods

I recruited survey participants through announcements distributed by mail, at meetings of interest groups and organizations, in local newspapers, and at offices of land management agencies. Interested individuals who saw the announcements were invited to send me their mailing addresses, and I then mailed them a survey packet including instructions and response forms. Some survey packets were also distributed to interested individuals at public or interest-group meetings about resource management in the local area. In a few cases, I gave sets of survey packets to a contact person in a community or institution, who then distributed them to others within their group.

The first survey was done at the Morton Arboretum in the Chicago suburb of Lisle, IL, to learn how Arboretum members and volunteers experienced the diverse landscapes of this popular site. The Morton Arboretum is a 1700-acre site containing a range of outdoor settings, including formal gardens, natural woodlands, a few small lakes, scenic roads, walking paths, and a restored prairie. A pilot version of the survey was conducted at a meeting of an Arboretum class on experiencing the landscape co-taught

Table 1
Qualitative place surveys

	Location	Date	Respondents	No. of respondents	No. of place descriptions
(1)	Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL	1985–1986	Arboretum members and volunteers	39[a]	175
(2)	Black River area, MI	1993	Residents and visitors	24	66
(3)	Upper Peninsula, MI	1996	Commercial woodland managers	15	36
(4)	Chequamegon area, WI	1996	Residents and visitors	11	33
(5)	Moose Lake, WI	1997	Residents	10	20
(6)	Lake Calumet area, IL and IN	2000–2001	Residents and visitors	24	74
	Total			123	404

[a]Includes 10 participants in an initial pilot survey conducted in an Arboretum class.

by the author. Participants in the main survey were recruited through announcements in the Arboretum newsletter and at a training session for Arboretum volunteers (Schroeder, 1991).

The second survey was carried out as part of the planning process for the Black River area on the Ottawa National Forest, on the shore of Lake Superior in northern Michigan. The Black River area is a minimally developed, forested corridor, including a river with a number of waterfalls, a scenic road, a stretch of the North Country Scenic Trail, a campground, a picnic area, a harbor, and a small community of year-round and seasonal residents. Participants were recruited through the National Forest's public involvement mailing lists, as well as fliers and announcements distributed in the Black River area and nearby communities. Respondents included a mix of long-term, permanent residents, seasonal vacationers, and first-time visitors to the area (Schroeder, 1996, 2000).

The Michigan Upper Peninsula survey was completed by commercial woodland managers who attended a workshop on social science research methods for employees of a large paper company in Northern Michigan. The survey was distributed to attendees before the workshop, and those who wished to participate completed it at home. The results were then discussed during the workshop as an example of a qualitative research method. The geographic area specified in the survey was the entire Upper Peninsula of Michigan, a largely rural, forested region with two National Forests, several state parks, and abundant natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities.

The geographic area for the Chequamegon area survey consisted of Bayfield, Ashland, and Sawyer Counties in far northern Wisconsin, which includes part of the Chequamegon National Forest, The Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, and several state and county parks and forests. This region includes a mix of agricultural and forested land, a number of small cities and towns, numerous lakes, trails, and other recreation opportunities. It is a popular destination for vacationers. Participants were recruited through fliers and announcements distributed by environmental organizations and newspapers in that region. Respondents included seasonal vacationers and permanent residents of the area, a few of whom worked for agencies and institutions concerned with the management of natural resources in the area.

The Moose Lake survey was distributed to members of a local residents' group concerned about a controversial land exchange between the federal government and a private developer near their homes on Moose Lake in northern Wisconsin. Moose Lake is located within the Chequamegon area. A member of the group had heard about the Chequamegon area study and contacted me to request that his group be included among the participants. I provided him with a set of surveys, which he distributed at a meeting of the group. The geographic scope for this group was the same as for the Chequamegon area survey.

The final survey was carried out during the planning process for the ecological and economic revitalization of the Lake Calumet area in northeast Illinois (including part of Chicago) and northwest Indiana. The Lake Calumet area contains ecologically significant remnant wetlands and other natural habitats intermixed with heavy industry, waste disposal sites, residential neighborhoods, and commercial development. There are several parks, forest preserves, and lakes used for recreation in the area. The area is especially well-known among birders for the diversity of bird species (some quite rare) that can be observed there. Participants were recruited through an announcement in a local newspaper, fliers distributed at public meetings and a local nature center, and notices in newsletters and e-mail lists of environmental groups interested in the Calumet area. Respondents included residents and former residents of the area, recreational visitors (some of them birders), and individuals involved in land use planning and environmental management within the area (Schroeder, 2004).

The survey packets contained a cover letter, instructions, and several response sheets. The cover letter identified the researcher as a research social scientist working for a federal land management agency, and explained that the purpose of the survey was to help planners and managers understand how people see, experience, and value the outdoor places and natural features of the area. In the initial survey at the Morton Arboretum, I instructed participants to think of one or more places within the Arboretum that characterized what the Arboretum was

like for them. In the subsequent surveys, I asked people to think of outdoor places within the geographic area of the survey that were important, special, or memorable to them. In all the surveys, I instructed respondents first to briefly describe each place they chose, and then to tell what the place meant to them by writing about their thoughts, feelings, memories, experiences, or anything else that came to mind in connection with it. The response forms consisted of mostly blank pieces of 8.5×11-in paper, with the top half labeled "description of place" and the bottom half labeled "what it means to you." A separate sheet was used for each place the respondent chose to describe. The last page of the survey included a few background questions about the respondents, such as the location of their home, how long they had lived in or visited the geographic area of the survey, and the activities they most enjoyed doing in that area. The last page also had a space for general comments about the geographic area or about the survey itself. Respondents completed the survey at home and mailed their response sheets back to me.

The highly unstructured format of the survey was intended to give respondents the maximum freedom to express their experiences in their own way. I felt that open-ended descriptions of real places selected by the respondents themselves as special would be most effective in conveying to natural resource professionals how and why people care about these places. The instructions emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers, that participants were free to respond in whatever way they liked, and that we were interested in anything they wanted to tell us about their special places.

2.2. Participants

The participants in these surveys obviously were not a random sample of the public, and the findings of the surveys therefore cannot be quantitatively generalized to the population at large. The intent of the surveys was not to obtain statistically representative estimates of the frequencies with which themes occurred amongst the general public, but to help planners and managers to get a sense for the kinds of meanings and feelings that people associated with special places in the areas they manage. As one (but not the only) input to public involvement for planning and management, an effort was made to invite participation from as many people as possible who had feelings of attachment to special outdoor places within these areas. The respondents could be characterized as a self-selected sample of people who were interested enough in the topic of study to contact me and who felt strongly enough about at least one special place to take the time to write about it on the survey. Although the sample sizes are small, the respondents across the six surveys included people with a diversity of ages, residential backgrounds, recreation preferences, and levels of experience with the geographic area of the survey.

2.3. Responses

The number of special places described by participants ranged from one to six. The length of the descriptions varied widely, from a minimum of 9 words to a maximum of 574 words. This difference could reflect a number of factors, including the degree of motivation of the respondent, the extent of their experience with the place, the time they had available to do the survey, and their facility with writing as a mode of expression. While the longer descriptions obviously provide more material for in-depth interpretation, many of the key themes that emerged were evidenced even in the shortest of the descriptions. Overall, the character of responses (including some of the shorter responses) suggests that the participants based their descriptions upon their personal experience of specific places about which they cared deeply. Asking the respondents to first write a description of a place before explaining why it was special helped to keep their responses grounded in their experience of a specific place. Many of the respondents seemed to find the survey task to be interesting and engaging, as evidenced by the vividness, detail, and enthusiastic tone of their descriptions. Several of them explicitly stated that they enjoyed the writing task and thanked me for giving them the opportunity to express their feelings about their special places.

2.4. Analysis

I analyzed each survey individually using a qualitative method similar to the "open coding" procedure described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). I read through the place descriptions one by one, dividing each into smaller text units consisting of phrases or sentences that expressed more or less distinct ideas or lines of thought. As I progressed through the text units, I made a list of common themes, topics, or concepts that were being mentioned. I organized this list into a hierarchical outline by grouping similar themes under more general headings. I cross-referenced each entry in the outline to the original text, so that I could refer back to and retrieve specific instances of each theme. When I had finished reading and cross-referencing the text, I wrote a narrative summary of the survey responses, including the most frequently mentioned themes as well as any other information that seemed useful for planning and management. In writing the summary, I referred back to the original text to find quotations illustrating each of the themes I presented.

2.5. Themes

There were both similarities and differences in the themes that emerged across the different surveys. The most obvious variations in responses were associated with differences in the personal and professional backgrounds of respondents and differences in the environmental characteristics of the survey areas. For example, the

professional woodland managers in the Michigan Upper Peninsula study were more likely to include signs of timber harvesting as a positive attribute of special places than were the residents and vacationers in the Black River and Chequamegon studies. Respondents in the Lake Calumet area near Chicago were more likely to comment on pollution and toxic waste as problems in their region than were respondents in the relatively more pristine northern areas of Wisconsin and Michigan.

Despite the differences between respondents and study areas, there were many similarities and common themes that appeared consistently across the survey groups. Beauty, serenity, and naturalness were three of the most common themes that arose in all of the surveys. Other frequent themes connected with special places included remoteness, refuge and escape, excitement, awe, social ties, family history, and heritage. The appearance of these common themes across different groups and geographic areas suggests that the findings from these surveys have at least some degree of generalizability. More details on the analysis approach and the themes that emerged from the individual surveys can be found in Schroeder (1991, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004).

2.6. Follow-up analysis

Following completion of the last of the individual surveys, I merged the responses from all of the surveys into a single data set and undertook a follow-up analysis to explore in greater detail some of the prominent themes that had appeared in the individual surveys. Initially, I focused on the three most prominent themes of beauty, serenity, and naturalness, seeking to identify variants on these themes, as well as how they were related to each other and to the environmental characteristics of special places. In the process of exploring these themes, several additional themes and linkages between themes attracted my attention. One particularly interesting cluster of interrelated themes involved the notion of a special place as a place where things are "the way they should be". That is, in some of the responses, the specialness of a special place involved a sense of everything being perfect, ideal, or in a harmonious order. This sense of rightness and order was sometimes associated with a feeling of serenity, and sometimes was expressed by describing the special place as a "heaven" or "paradise". The experience of things as they should be was often associated with undisturbed, non-human nature, but in some cases human influence was seen as harmonizing with the natural order in such a way that the human presence enhanced rather than intruded on nature.

I completed the follow-up analysis and published a description of this set of themes (Schroeder, 2005) before I was aware of Andrew Fuller's work on gestalt and phenomenological psychology. When I read Fuller's (1990) *Insight into Value*, I was struck by the way in which his ideas paralleled and resonated with many of the themes that I had already identified in the special places surveys. Although I had not used phenomenological methods in collecting and analyzing the survey responses, Fuller's ideas gave me some additional insight into the interconnections among the themes and suggested to me that experiences of special places might be understood as instances of a more general gestalt phenomenon of lifeworld value.

3. Gestalt interpretation of place and the human–nature relationship

In what follows, I attempt to show how Fuller's gestalt concepts can shed light on the questions raised earlier about place experience and the human–nature relationship. My purpose is not to develop an original phenomenology of place experience based on the special-places surveys, but to explore how certain aspects of Fuller's general phenomenology of value may apply to experiencing the human–nature relationship in special places. Although Fuller's phenomenological psychology is not explicitly an environmental psychology, he does use examples drawn from the experience of nature, and his gestalt ideas are rich in implications for the experience of environments and places. In this section, I attempt to draw out some of these implications, using the special-places surveys as a source of examples of how gestalt themes may be discerned in people's experiences of the human and natural features of places.

There is already a substantial literature in environmental phenomenology dealing with the experience of place (for reviews, see Graumann, 2002; Seamon, 1982, 2000), much of which would also be appropriate for interpreting the special-places survey responses. I have chosen to emphasize Fuller's approach to phenomenological psychology in this paper because, as far as I know, the gestalt concepts with which he deals have not yet been examined with respect to the experience of place and may therefore have something new to offer to the field. Where appropriate, I will also point out some parallels between Fuller's gestalt perspective and other phenomenological approaches in the place-experience literature.

3.1. The lifeworld and the gestalt law of requiredness

The starting point for Fuller's (1990) phenomenological account of gestalt psychology is the lifeworld of human experience. "Lifeworld" (*lebenswelt*) is a term coined by Husserl to denote the original, meaningful, everyday world in which people actually live. The task of phenomenological description and interpretation is to explicate hidden structures of lifeworld meaning that hitherto have been lived only in an implicit, unreflective way.

Fuller contrasts the lifeworld with the abstract, scientific world of mathematical space, time, and mass. The view of conventional science is that the world consists of objects located in a space–time grid, which we perceive and

experience, not directly, but as reconstructed images inside our brains. Thus, the natural attitude of scientifically trained people assumes a subject/object split, in which human experience and meaning are confined to the insides of people's craniums and the outer world consists of meaningless objects situated in geometric space and time. By contrast, the lifeworld is a meaningful world that is directly present for us in our everyday lives. In Fuller's account, human behavior and perception relate us to things themselves where they stand in the lifeworld, and not (as conventional psychology would have it) to mental representations of them inside our minds. Lifeworld meanings (e.g., things, places, people, situations) are neither subjective nor objective. Self and world are always both involved in their formation. The lifeworld appears only for a concerned self, and the self knows itself only through its involvement in the lifeworld. On this basis, Fuller (1990) defines phenomenological psychology as "the hermeneutic science of human immersion in and preoccupation with lifeworld events of meaning" (p. 33).

Meanings in the lifeworld do not stand alone. They do not exist independently, but are interrelated with each other from the start. A meaning is what it is only in the context of its relationship to other meanings. The gestalt quality of lifeworld meanings refers to the way in which meanings self-organize to form coherently structured wholes. The structure of the whole (the gestalt) is not imposed from outside, but is determined by the interrelations among its constituent parts.

The gestalt psychologists identified a number of "laws" describing how the constituents of a gestalt spontaneously self-organize into a coherent pattern. For example, in a visual display, items that look similar or are close together tend to be perceived together as a unit. The most general of the gestalt laws, the law of good gestalt (or *pregnance*), says that gestalts tend to form in a way that achieves the simplest, most balanced, or clearest structure possible in a given situation. As Fuller formulates it, the law of good gestalt is "a statement of meaning's tendency to achieve a state where it is just right, just what it ought to be, both as to its inner constitution and as to its broader relations of significance" (Fuller, 1990, p. 121). Fuller uses Köhler's (1966) term "requiredness" to denote this intrinsic tendency of lifeworld meanings to press for the best, clearest, most harmonious organization possible. A good gestalt is recognized by its "inner coherence" or "inner necessity" (Fuller, 1990, p. 113). There is a sense of rightness in the way each constituent of the gestalt fits into the context of the whole. Whether a good gestalt is actually achieved or not depends jointly on the characteristics of the lifeworld materials available and the capabilities and interests of the person for whom they are present.

3.2. Gestalt qualities in place experience

With respect to the experience of place, Fuller's analysis suggests that a law of good gestalt or requiredness is at work in the way the various features within a place interact to form an overall sense of the character of the place. A place in which a good gestalt is achieved, then, would be expected to have a strong sense of place and to convey a quality of coherence, rightness, or perfection. Thinking about sense of place in this way, in terms of the constituent features of the place forming a strong gestalt, seems consonant with Relph's (1976) conception of places as ordering centers in people's experiences of the world.

In fact, participants in the qualitative place surveys did describe some of their places as being perfect or ideal, either in their overall character or with respect to some particular purpose or type of use. (The number in parentheses following a quotation indicates which of the surveys in Table 1 it is from.)

> The campground on Black Lake is perfect. Very well maintained, yet rustic. (4)
> The perfect place to relax and unwind from the rigors of daily life. (5)

Certain places seemed to exemplify an ideal state of the world in which things were just the way they ought to be, or in which the features of the place fit together in a harmonious, balanced, and orderly way.

> A small reminder that this is the way the world should be … . (1)
> This area is truly God's country at its best! (5)
> Rather like a living piece of artwork in its impact. It appears orderly, in balance and inviting. (1)

Beauty was one of the most commonly mentioned qualities in survey respondents' descriptions of places, and according to Fuller (1990) beauty is inherently linked to the attainment of a good gestalt. All good gestalts in some way manifest the quality of beauty, and "The law of good gestalt or requiredness could almost as well be called a law of beauty" (p. 150). The requiredness of a good gestalt "is experienced in an especially pronounced manner when we encounter things that are truly (intrinsically) wonderful, truly beautiful. We marvel at such things, recognizing in them something special, ideal states of affairs" (Fuller, 1990, p. 149).

Many of the survey participants marveled at the beauty of their places, which evoked a sense of awe, wonder, and magic.

> We take slow trips through this trail … to wonder at the beauty of winter. The magic of snow on a pine bow, the utter silence with the occasional crack of a branch is something everyone should experience. (5)
> There are so many beautiful nature preserves and lands to explore, and I have. They all have natural beauty that fills me with joy, just to behold it. (6)

Another characteristic of a well-formed gestalt is the way in which it tends to "rest in its positive state" (Fuller, 1990, p. 122). Having attained a state of balance, a good gestalt is free of the troubling tensions that arise in an imperfectly

formed gestalt. Therefore, a place in which a good gestalt is attained might be expected to convey a sense of serenity and restfulness. Peacefulness or tranquility was, in fact, another of the most frequently mentioned qualities of places in the surveys. It was sometimes mentioned in conjunction with beauty, and sometimes was associated with a sense of order, harmony, or rightness in a place.

> Enjoying the sights, sounds & tranquil beauty of the area. (2)
>
> When I find myself walking in this area I have a sense of well-being and peace. It has the appearance of orderliness. It imparts a sense of quiet and restfulness. (1)

By contrast, a poor or failed gestalt has a disturbing quality, which Fuller calls "negative requiredness." Meanings with negative requiredness bother us. They have a sense of wrongness, incompleteness, or tension, straining away from their negative state and toward a more ideal, good gestalt. "Negative requiredness, constituted by restless tensions, is a meaning that is not at peace" (Fuller, 1990, p. 122). Negative requiredness draws our attention to changes that would improve the gestalt, and when discordant elements are present that prevent attainment of a good gestalt, the overall context of the gestalt "sometimes is found to reject one of its parts altogether" (Fuller, 1990, p. 122).

The tension that presses for a better gestalt was evident when survey respondents pointed out elements that intruded on or clashed with the positive quality of their places, or that prevented it from being "the perfect place."

> Veikko Trail area on other side makes this a nice big area w/o much interruption. (Snowmobile trail through center is a big bummer). (4)
>
> When I look at it, there's such a superb view from the hill but it's not complete and uniform. It's frustrating and unsatisfying. (1)
>
> If only the "black fly problem" could be controlled, we would be convinced that it would be the "perfect place." (2)

Sometimes respondents characterized a place in terms of the absence of any such disturbing, out-of-place features.

> One of my favorite places is a woodsy area, with a stream running through it. … There is no lawn grass, only natural vegetation. (1)
>
> The fishing is good and best of all there is no private or public dwellings or structures of any kind. (5)

The tension inherent in an imperfect gestalt sometimes induced study participants to "edit" their places in their imaginations, for example by removing elements that clashed with its overall character, or adding elements to complete the scene.

> Rolling hills of grass (try to ignore electrical towers) for a great distance. (1)
>
> The story of "Heidi" … this view only needs a tiny village, near the pond, to be the picture in my mind from reading the story. (1)

Nogué i Font (1993) noted a similar tendency on the part of landscape painters in the Garrotxa region of Catalonia to exclude from their paintings modern structures and artifacts that they see as out of place in the traditional landscape, and to include traditional features, such as buckwheat, which are actually no longer common in the region. As one painter said, "It's a matter of getting rid of things that do not fit in the landscape. On my canvas, landscape recovers its virginity" (p. 175).

3.3. Nature as gestalt

The preceding section characterized sense of place in general as the manifestation of a good gestalt. In the present section, I look more specifically at the quality of naturalness, which in addition to beauty and serenity was attributed to special places by many survey respondents. Of course, sense of place need not always include a sense of naturalness. Designed and built places without significant natural elements may form a good gestalt and have a strong sense of place. Some of the survey place descriptions did focus on the human elements of a place, such as its history, family connections, built features, and community character. Overall, however, nature was a prominent theme in the place descriptions (perhaps because respondents had been instructed specifically to think about outdoor places). Survey participants often associated naturalness with the gestalt qualities of beauty and serenity.

> Our family has spent much time walking the shoreline and enjoying the natural beauty of the beach and lake. This is one of the few spots we've found where you can enjoy the quiet and serenity of nature. (2)

Fuller describes how the beauty of a natural object or place gives rise to a sense of nature as a presence or entity in itself, deserving of admiration and respect:

> In its esthetic dimension, nature—the rose, the tree in the meadow, Niagara Falls, a pet cat—becomes an end to stand in awe of for its own sake … Appreciated in its beauty, nature is exactly itself, the sheer structural rightness of itself, admirable itself (Fuller, 1990, p. 151).

This suggests that the perception of naturalness may be an outcome of the gestalt quality of place experience. In gestalt terms, we could define the experience of nature as the perception of an intrinsic order, coherence, beauty, or value in the world that is not attributable to human intention or design. In certain places and for certain people the gestalt of nature manifests in an especially compelling way, as a presence evoking appreciation, fascination, and a sense of intrinsic rightness in the non-human domain. Viewing the experience of nature in this way, as a gestalt phenomenon, resonates with popular notions of nature and

ecology. For example, the idea of the "balance of nature," which depicts nature as a self-organizing system of harmoniously interacting parts, closely parallels the psychological definition of a gestalt.

The descriptions of places in the surveys sometimes expressed a sense of rightness about the way in which the "forces of nature" rather than human activity determined the character of the place.

> This is a rare place, where nature, more than man, is running the show. That's how it should remain. (4)
> Everything seems to be working. Even though the woods are preparing for their dormant time, the forest seems resilient. I sense the cycles. (1)

The sense of rightness in the gestalt of nature was reflected in frequent comparisons of natural places to paradise or heaven.

> It's our Paradise. We love and respect it and fervently hope it is not improved to death. Let Nature do what she does so well. (2)
> Reminds me of what my impression of the garden of Eden might be shown as. A harmony of nature and gentleness. (1)

Tuan (1974) points out that the environmental ideal of a people can be discerned in their ideas about the world after death. A culture's image of the afterworld inhabited by favored spirits generally resembles the world where they actually live, but with the unpleasing and distressing aspects removed. Thus, heaven is a place of ultimate rightness, order, and peace, where things are exactly as they should be and always in the right relationship to each other. At the individual level, heaven might be defined as the best possible place-gestalt that could form, given the constituents available in a person's lifeworld. It is striking that several of the survey respondents seemed to feel that their special places had achieved something close to this ideal gestalt.

3.4. Human features in relation to nature's gestalt

If, as suggested above, perceptions of naturalness involve a gestalt formed by the non-human elements of a place, then the impression of humans and their works as separate from nature or as part of nature within that place depends on how the human elements of the place relate to the gestalt of the non-human environment. In many cases, human elements and influences mentioned in the survey place descriptions were seen as conflicting with or intruding on nature's gestalt—or in extreme cases destroying it.

> Before the campground existed, we loved the special wooded area where it now "intrudes." (2)
> Beauty of forest, birds, bears, peace. Unfortunately, the USFS [United States Forest Service] is cutting at an unprecedented rate (and in a sloppy manner) and has destroyed this area with a rather nasty (wasteful) clearcut. Did mean a beautiful walk every morning. Now means a destroyed ecosystem. (4)

This was especially the case with modern development such as roads, commercial buildings, and automobiles. Within the context of a natural environment these kinds of human features created a disturbing negative requiredness, and they were often rejected outright as conflicting with the character of a place. This conveyed a sense of separation between humans and nature, a sense that human influence was incompatible with the natural gestalt and needed to be excluded to protect the beauty and serenity of the natural environment.

> I have many days of fond memories on this stretch of river. I hope that it will always be there without too much human intrusion. (5)

In some descriptions from the place surveys, cleanness also seemed to be associated with the natural character of the setting.

> A small lake in a wilderness area—clean & wild. (4)
> A beautiful, clean area that people can see nature in all its glory. (2)

Like beauty and serenity, the cleanness of a place can be seen as an indicator of good gestalt. Douglas (1966) defines dirt as "matter out of place." In other words, dirt is not inherently dirty, but is dirty by virtue of being in the wrong place or in the wrong relationship with its context. Dirt is the violation or disruption of an orderly system: "Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained" (p. 40). Applying this definition to a natural environment, litter and pollution (two forms of environmental "dirt") can be seen as human intrusions in or disruptions of the natural gestalt of a place.

> We parked and walked down to the marvelous beach. It wasn't junky with cement and debris then. It's sad to go there now with the big cistern on the beach and old foundation cement. (2)

Human elements in the place surveys did not always conflict with their natural surroundings, however. There were also instances of human features fitting or blending into the natural surroundings, which conveyed more of a sense of humans as part of (or at least existing in harmony with) nature.

> Across the pond the restaurant building seems to blend into the scene giving a feeling of man & nature as one & blended. This building does not offend nature but enhances it. Just as some people have "a way with animals" this building has a way with its surroundings. (1)

Whether or not the human elements of a place fit into the natural gestalt of the place depended on the character of those elements. In some cases, a fairly subtle change in the configuration of these elements could influence how natural

they appeared in their setting. For example, in a Northwoods harbor, the mooring of boats parallel to the shore, instead of on slips perpendicular to the shore, gave the harbor a more natural appearance to one observer.

> The harbor itself gives a strong feeling of a place of refuge. While boats sometimes seem intrusive—the broadside mooring makes them seem more natural. (2)

Human alterations of the environment to improve access were not necessarily seen as intrusive, as long as they did not disrupt the prevailing natural gestalt.

> The trails are safe for families yet unobtrusive in the setting. (4)
> The handicapped area was a wonderful improvement without affecting the beauty of the place. (2)

In some circumstances, respondents even felt that human actions to change the landscape could make a positive contribution to the natural gestalt of a place.

> Improving visual aspects of N. Country Trail always acceptable. (2)
> A man-made large lake … Its looks would be improved with some shoreline enhancements, such as an irregular shoreline with beach areas, islands, and trees. (6)

The harmonious interplay of human and natural aspects of landscapes was especially notable in the responses from visitors and volunteers at the Morton Arboretum. The Arboretum features a broad range of settings with varying degrees of human influence, from natural forests to formal gardens. The roads and visitor facilities have been carefully designed to complement their natural surroundings, so it is not surprising that this area in particular would evoke impressions of humans in a harmonious relationship with nature.

> Maintained and landscaped displays of plantings such as the entry to the Arboretum, Joy Path or the Rhododendron beds. Man and nature working together to create beauty. (1)

In highly formal settings, such as the Arboretum's enclosed Fragrance Garden, the dominant gestalt of the place was a result of human design rather than natural processes. In this case, a sense of harmony between the human and the natural involved natural elements fitting into a gestalt of human origin, rather than vice versa.

> The Fragrance Garden—a jewel set into the background of a larger scene. It seems man must have nature molded to his own design and this is an excellent molding. (1)

In some place descriptions, the human features of the place seemed to contrast with the natural elements, but this contrast was not disruptive or disturbing. The transition between the human and the natural seemed to give a sense of the human domain as different from nature, but existing alongside nature in a mutually enhancing relationship.

> From the manicured evergreens and hedges to the naturally shaped pines and spruces. … There is something about the transition from man-made to nature-made. (1)
> Joy Path—so like an English garden with its edges calling to more untamed things. (1)

3.5. The individual's sense of self in relation to nature

In some cases, a person's experience of a place gave them a sense of their own individual connection with nature. Being in a place with a strong natural gestalt gave some people the experience of being personally included in the natural order, which for many was a profoundly satisfying experience.

> Helps to plant your feet back on the ground and remind you of your place in nature's scheme. (3)
> Walking among the trees. Enjoying the "feeling" of nature and yourself in the whole system. (1)
> It keeps me connected on a daily basis to the rhythms of nature and the changing seasons. It's a simple, pure pleasure and always a surprise. (6)

Many of the respondents seemed to experience themselves personally as being part of or fitting into nature in the places they described. This is not surprising, since the survey instructions directed people to describe special outdoor places, for which they presumably felt some kind of positive attachment. Even so, there were a few cases in which survey respondents described ambivalent feelings or a sense of not fitting into the natural environment. This occurred for several people when they first encountered a prairie restoration at the Morton Arboretum, a type of setting with which they were unfamiliar.

> I appreciate and understand the importance of the prairies, but do not feel comfortable in the open grasses. What about ticks and chiggers? … But, there is a sense of balance in this plant community. The land seems alive and moving. What an ecosystem for insects! It is a sense of ambivalence that I feel. I respect this environ, but do not wish to dwell there for long. (1)
> The visual picture is beyond any verbal description. It is too different from anything in my background to understand without experiencing it. In fact, I find it somewhat unnerving, but fascinating. (1)

To experience themselves as being in nature, people often felt that they needed to be away from other people and civilization. One of the more common themes in the place descriptions was of natural places contrasting with and providing a refuge from urbanized and commercially developed areas.

> Again, the solitude is key. It means I can still escape the strip malls, outlet stores, and encroaching 4-lane highways and find a place to hear the wind, a loon, or the slap of a beaver tail. (4)

> Deep in the east woods. … There aren't too many places at the Arb where you can really get lost in nature and be apart from the influences of mankind. (1)
>
> Small lake, scenic shoreline. Walk in access only. … I like the isolation, the ability to escape the phone, T. V., the effects of civilization. (3)

Thus a person's sense of the human–nature relationship in a place might differ depending on whether they are considering their own personal sense of connection with nature there, or the way in which humans and civilization in general relate to the natural gestalt of the place. The same place could evoke a sense of being part of nature at the individual, personal level, and at the same time a more general sense of human civilization being separate from and at odds with nature. This might help to explain Vining's (2003) paradoxical finding that many people say they believe they are part of nature, while at the same time defining nature as being free of human evidence and contact.

Sometimes people used the concept of "home" to describe their sense of belonging and fitting into the scheme of nature. For some people who lived in undeveloped forest areas, their home literally was in the midst of a natural setting.

> Did you ever wonder what a part of heaven looks like? I Found out 13 years ago when I moved here. … The pleasure I get from living within and sharing a place of beauty that is my home is hard to describe. It's a belief there is peace on earth. (2)

For others, the setting reminded them of a place that used to be their home. Still others used the notion of home in a more figurative or imaginative way to describe their sense of comfort or belonging in natural environments that they visited.

By contrast, some settings—especially those with vast or powerful natural features—gave people a sense of themselves and humanity as overwhelmed and insignificant in comparison to nature.

> Incredibly tall, straight trees. The air smells of pine and the wind always seems to rustle through the pine tops. … I feel small and insignificant. (3)
>
> Bluffs above the lake—place to … remember how 'large' the lake is and how significant it is vs. mankind being just a speck in the universe. (2)

These kinds of places evoked awe and humility, sometimes even verging on fear. Such places seemed to produce an impression of humans as apart from more than as part of nature—not due to the intrusiveness or inappropriateness of any human features of the place, but rather to the powerful presence of a natural gestalt that rendered human elements insignificant and of no consequence.

These variations on the experience of being personally included versus not fitting into nature in a place call to mind Relph's (1976) classic study, *Place and Placelessness*. Relph proposed insideness and outsideness as basic dimensions of the experience of place. Insideness and outsideness each can occur in several different modes. In the special place surveys, it seems that many of the respondents experienced what Relph calls existential insideness with respect to natural environments. They felt a sense of belonging, comfort, and at-homeness in such places, even sometimes on their first occasion in a particular place. The experience of insideness with respect to natural places seemed to be mirrored for many people by a sense of outsideness with respect to the urban or commercially developed areas they were seeking to escape from. Outsideness could also be experienced with respect to natural places, perhaps connected with a lack of familiarity with a new kind of environment or the presence of threatening or alienating features there. Relph's modes of existential insideness and outsideness thus might be seen as correlated with the gestalt notions of positive and negative requiredness with respect to a person's self-environment gestalt.

3.6. Variability in the experience of nature

Viewed in gestalt terms, the experience of nature is seen to involve the perception of an intrinsic order, harmony, or beauty in the world that is not (or at least not wholly) attributable to human agency. But the extent to which this experience occurs, where it occurs, and the precise way in which it occurs can vary dramatically from one person to another. For example, one person at the Morton Arboretum found a forest of large, mature trees to be a source of awe and inspiration.

> An area of majestic, towering native hardwoods with a dominating understory of sugar maples. Spectacular in the fall, haven for wild flowers in the spring. Awesome, breathtaking, beautiful areas to wander through, experiencing the sight, the terrain, nature controlling the environment. You can be as isolated as you want to be if that's your thing. But you can never stop admiring the wonder of it all and dwell on the mysteries of nature that can create such a primitive, almost threatening environment. It's beautiful, and scary. Makes one feel totally insignificant—and alone. (1)

Another person at the Arboretum, however, found the very same area of woods to be boring, and was put off by the larger-than-human scale of the trees there.

> The maple woods. Nothing but trees surrounding you. … Not much on the ground, boring. Sort of a formless landscape … I feel like I'm in a closet. I can understand why people say "if you've seen one (maple) you've seen them all." I feel like all the action is up over my head in the canopy where I can't see. These trees remind me of yuppies—they take over and crowd everyone else out, then they move the prices up so high

> that nobody else can get into the action. Don't they get bored? (1)

This person felt more at home in smaller scale settings with signs of human involvement and care, which seemed to welcome a human presence rather than overwhelming it.

> The water lily pond with small ornamental tree outside the Admin. Bldg.. … It's small scale—no huge towering trees to make you feel like an ant. … Beautiful curves make you feel wanted. The whole thing makes me feel like I'm wanted and people belong there. … Bugs and fish and birds could grow there and drink the water but it's still human-size and accessible—you can go right up and reach the pool and the plants with your hand. (1)

As another example, most of the respondents in the Northwoods of Wisconsin and Michigan regarded logging as an intrusion in their special places, but the commercial woodland managers in the Michigan Upper Peninsula survey found signs of management and timber harvesting to be an integral and positive aspect of the places they described.

> Hardwood stand-selectively thinned twice in past 25 years. … Good form to trees, good reproduction including saplings & seedlings. … Stumps from past harvest visible. Visible paths used by skidding operation. Means renewable resource is being managed in best form. Enjoy seeing the uneven aged size of trees, good form of log trees & veneer trees. (3)

This variability in the meaning and value of natural and human aspects of places has led some scholars and researchers to the view that nature itself has no objective existence, but is a social construction—a concept invented in different ways by different groups for their own purposes. For example, Hull et al. (2001) noted a wide variety of different understandings of nature, and characterized environmental decision making as a tournament of competing, socially constructed values. While social constructionism has many variations and is employed in a variety of ways (Demeritt, 2002; Evernden, 1992; Soule & Lease, 1995), its general thrust has been to deobjectify "nature" and to regard nature as an invention of human culture.

Phenomenology has some commonality with social constructionist views of nature, in that it regards humans as playing an essential role in the constitution of lifeworld meanings. Phenomenology does not, however, consider lifeworld meanings (such as nature) to be subjective concepts constructed in our minds and then imposed upon an inherently meaningless world. Nature, from the viewpoint of phenomenology, is not a concept inside our minds but a presence we encounter in the lifeworld—albeit a presence that appears differently to different people. The experience of nature as a presence immediately apprehended in the surrounding environment is vividly conveyed in several of the place survey descriptions.

> I am calmed by the Oaks' mere stature and presence. … There is at once strength, and form in these native trees that create a potent force and magic in the area. (1)
>
> This area is a remnant of a once vast deciduous woods of the East. I feel its constant rhythms, and sense our heritage when centuries ago the forest was our home. (1)

Phenomenology recognizes that meanings may form differently for different people in the same locale, depending on their predispositions, past experiences, interests, and abilities. But phenomenology does not divide existence into separate realms of external, objective space versus internal, subjective experience. As a lifeworld meaning, nature is neither an objective entity, existing independently of human experience, nor a subjective concept, invented within the mind. Nature arises as a presence in the world, but only through the involvement of a self for whom it is present—a self that simultaneously interprets and is impacted by the meaning that arises (Fuller, 1990).

In the lifeworld, nature can appear in many ways, yet we are not always free to construct it in any way we want. The immediately experienced qualities of real places may at times compete with more generalized, socially constructed ideas about nature. Brandenburg and Carroll (1995) found that members of social groups that held divergent values about environmental management nevertheless shared strikingly similar emotional attachments to a particular river drainage near where they lived. Generalized, abstract meanings and values about nature and resource management appeared to become more complex and less stereotypical in the context of frequent, direct experience with that place. The experienced qualities of the place appeared to override at least some of the socially constructed meanings that had passed to individuals from the communities they belonged to.

In the special-places surveys, it occasionally appeared that the immediately experienced qualities of a place would resist the socially constructed meanings that a person brought to it. The person quoted above, who was bored by the forest of large trees at the Morton Arboretum, tried without success to impose a more conventional, socially constructed interpretation onto that setting.

> What's wrong with me? I try to appreciate [the big trees] for awhile … I feel guilty when I'm in the woods for not liking them more. …. Maybe I didn't look hard enough. What was I supposed to see, I wonder. I tell myself they're doing something valuable even though I get bored there. Maybe I didn't look closely into their leaves or under their logs. I left. (1)

A commercial forest manager who, consistent with the culture of his profession, regarded forests as places to be managed and harvested found that this meaning was inapplicable to certain places where the beauty of nature was especially apparent.

> The place is quiet, pristine, and primitive. … It's rugged and wild with some beautiful, panoramic views from the

rocks. Its one of the few areas that I've been in that I did not want to manage or manipulate. (3)

Walking through a stand like this tends to remind me of how beautiful natural stands can be. … I also feel sad because I realize that this stand is scheduled to be harvested soon. (3)

Variability in the experience of nature may occur not only between different people, but also for the same person over time. In some cases a person's awareness and appreciation of nature changed or developed through contact with an unfamiliar or previously unappreciated place. This shift can be understood as the formation of a new gestalt, an act of "insight into value" that involves a simultaneous interpreting of and being impacted by lifeworld meaning (Fuller, 1990).

This is all new to me. Having moved here from Kentucky, I had never given much thought about any beauty in flatlands. The prairie at Morton Arboretum was a revelation to me when I first saw it. Who would have thought there would be such beauty in grasses and "weeds?" (1)

The fall colors were gone—I had never appreciated beauty much this time of year, with winter so close. … I was suddenly impressed by the stillness of the forest and the endless carpet of brown leaves on the ground. In its own way it was very beautiful. (1)

3.7. The moral dimension of place experience

For Fuller, the gestalt structuring of lifeworld experience is the basis for a broadly inclusive phenomenology of value. He sees the law of good gestalt or requiredness at work in the way people experience all kinds of values, including use values, beauty values, knowledge values, and morality values. Each kind of lifeworld value demands its own characteristic kind of response from the person for whom it is present. "To experience something's positive requiredness … is to find ourselves already obliged to it" (Fuller, 1990, p. 139). Thus, the gestalt law of requiredness can engender a moral dimension in place experience, a sense that certain actions are right or fitting with respect to a place and others are not.

A connection between the experience of wholeness of place and a sense of moral obligation can be discerned in recent phenomenological writings on environment, place, and design. Seamon (1993), for example, suggests that a phenomenological ecology with a focus on wholeness, harmony, and belonging would evoke a sense of positive obligation toward nature. For Riegner (1993), a phenomenological ecology grounded in an awareness of the wholeness of a landscape, as manifested in the forms of its plants and animals, calls for designing human artifacts that are compatible with the meaning of the whole. In a similar vein, Stefanovic (2000) proposes an environmental ethic for sustainability based in a concern for "needs that announce themselves from the context of the situation as a whole" (p. 144). Tuan (1993) sees a historical link between notions of morality and aesthetic qualities such as order and wholeness, which extends to a sense of the human role in landscapes: "Most people see beauty in a well-cared-for countryside; they may also agree that its beauty is inseparable from a certain moral ambience and weight" (p. 220).

Before proceeding, I want to clarify that my purpose in discussing the moral dimension of place experience here is descriptive and not normative. That is, I am not advocating for an environmental ethic based on gestalt properties of place. I am merely trying to show that a person's experience of a place may include a feeling of being called on to act in ways that respect or protect the integrity of the place.

By Fuller's account, such a feeling of moral obligation towards a place issues from the intrinsic requiredness of the place itself, rather than from rules or moral principles that a person brings to it from outside. At the same time, the specific form that such a sense of moral obligation takes depends very much on the predispositions and past experiences of the person who feels it. Not everyone will experience a sense of obligation toward a particular place, nor will two people necessarily experience the same sense of obligation toward a given place. "A tree sacred to one group as the very residence of The Divine is mere firewood to another" (Fuller, 1990, p. 241). To say that a sense of moral obligation issues from the intrinsic requiredness of a place is not to objectify morality and ground it in a domain independent of the person. A place is part of the lifeworld, and in the lifeworld there is no fundamental separation between the world that is experienced and the person who experiences it.

The moral dimension of place experience appeared in various ways in the survey responses. Positive requiredness might call on a person to take actions to protect and maintain a good place-gestalt or to refrain from actions that would violate it. Thus, some people expressed the expectation that people should respect nature and exercise restraint in their actions toward it.

My father (who passed away just one year ago) taught us to respect this land and water and all that it holds. We have come here for forty years and owned property in the forest. We were never able to "manicure" the property because it would alter the surroundings so dear to him. (5)

Many people strongly urged that their special place be maintained in its present, ideal condition, free from intrusive development or resource extraction.

It is wonderful returning to a place that remains so beautiful and quiet. Please do all you can to leave it in its natural state. (5)

Please keep forest as is. NO LOGGING! None! (2)

The negative requiredness of an imperfect gestalt might also call on a person to take actions to improve or complete

it. Some people felt obliged to pick up litter or to engage in other actions to care for the place and keep it in a good condition.

> The people who work here are friendly and helpful and keep all areas in good shape. I can't do very much to help but I try to pick up "throw-aways" along Black River Road as I have my daily walk. The area is for everyone to enjoy and I live here, it's my home and homes should be neat, inside and outside, private or public. (2)

Involvement in restoring and maintaining the natural qualities of a place was another example of how people could experience themselves in a harmonious relationship with nature.

> A true sand ridge prairie, where Lake Michigan once lived … I'm proud to be its steward and lead the restoration group in keeping it trim. (6)

A sense of moral obligation grounded in the gestalt qualities of natural places appears to have been the source of one of the most popular statements of environmental ethics in recent decades. Leopold's (1978) land ethic presents a view of the human–nature relationship that strongly resonates with a gestalt interpretation of nature. Leopold believed that "conservation is a state of harmony between men and land" (p. 243), and that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community" (p. 262). Leopold's (1978) essays on "the Quality of Landscape" in *A Sand County Almanac* suggest that his emphasis on harmony, stability, and beauty in the land ethic was motivated by his experience of the gestalt of nature in particular places that he knew—a gestalt that combined his immediate perceptual awareness of the environment with his conceptual knowledge of ecological interrelationships. In "Song of the Gavilan," for example, he depicts the gestalt of the Rio Gavilan as a musical harmony, "its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals" (Leopold, 1978, p. 158). He describes how indigenous people lived in harmony with the life of the river, and how this harmony would be "marred by the discords of misuse" (p. 159). The land ethic as experienced by Leopold could be interpreted as a felt obligation to maintain the ecological gestalt of the land, an obligation that he saw as calling on humans to adapt themselves to the structural requiredness of the natural community.

4. Summary and conclusions

In this paper I have tried to show how Fuller's (1990) phenomenological account of gestalt psychology can be applied to understanding the experience of natural places and environments. A special place—one with a strong "sense of place"—may be understood as a place whose constituent features and qualities form a good gestalt for the people who visit or live there. The specialness of such a place is a function of its intrinsic requiredness, the way in which its parts relate to each other with a sense of rightness, coherence, and harmony.

When a place contains both human and non-human features, the way in which these features interact within the context of the overall gestalt may give varying impressions of the relationship between humans and non-human nature. At an abstract, conceptual level we may ask whether people are part of or separate from nature, but from the perspective of place experience this question does not appear to have a simple, universal answer. A dominant gestalt formed by the non-human, natural aspects of a place in some cases seems to reject and in some cases to harmoniously include whatever human elements are present. In the lifeworld, nature appears (in diverse ways) as a gestalt, a whole composed of the self-organizing interrelationships among its parts. Humans appear as part of nature to the extent that their artifacts and actions fit into and harmonize with the gestalt of nature in a particular context. Insofar as human actions and influences violate or conflict with the gestalt of nature, humans appear as separate from nature.

In recent years, postmodern critiques of environmental management and ethics have tended to dismiss attempts to differentiate between humans and nature as arbitrary social constructions. Carried to the extreme, social constructionism reduces nature to an artifact of human culture and seems to deny that there is anything beyond the human realm that could play a role in our experience. But a close look at people's experiences of actual places suggests that concepts of nature are not constructed *ex nihilo*. Rather, the concept of nature points to a distinction between the human and the non-human that is real and important within many people's experience—a difference that is apprehended not only conceptually, but also through perception, feeling, and imagination. For many people, the experience of a difference or distinction between natural and human environments and entities is a matter of first-hand experience that is grounded in their experience of real places and is an important source of value in their lives (McKibben, 1989).

Experiencing a difference between humans and nature does not, however, mean that nature must be experienced as completely detached from and unrelated to human beings. In trying to understand the human relationship with nature, we need not limit ourselves to a dichotomous choice between logically opposed concepts of "part of" versus "apart from". Neither of these concepts by itself does justice to the complexity of the human–nature relationship as experienced in actual places. In some places, human elements appear as a harmonious part of a predominantly natural gestalt. In others, nature is a skillfully included component of a humanly designed environment. In some places, nature in its overwhelming presence renders human elements small and insignificant, while in others an intrusive human influence breaks the harmonious gestalt of nature. In still other places, natural

and human gestalts exist alongside each other, not merging into a single whole, and yet somehow highlighting and enhancing each other by virtue of their differences.

Just as a grown child who has left home can experience herself as being both part of and apart from her family of origin, our experience of places may lead us to experience ourselves as simultaneously part of and apart from nature. Cristancho and Vining (2004) found such a dialectical view of the human–nature relation among the indigenous Amazon community of the Letuama, who see nature both as what they are born from and as what is separate from and all around them. Cristancho and Vining contrasted this dialectical view to the logic of western culture, in which such ambiguity seems inconsistent with truth. Yet, while our western habits of thought may seem to compel us to make a choice between opposing categories of "part of" versus "apart from" nature, a more complex, dialectical form of experience may still be implicit in our immediate experience of at least some places and environments. Rolston (2004) found this to be the case in reflecting on his visits to a park:

> The park per se has dialectical value. The park puts cultured humans in encounter with spontaneous wild nature. … How am I over against this wild nature? How am I in harmony with these elemental sources? … One moment I seem part of nature and the next I seem apart from it. This question doesn't bother me in town, but in the park I cannot escape it. And maybe I should bother about this question in town, when I return, because I do want a culture in harmony with the nature from which it has also made exodus (Rolston, 2004, pp. 74–75).

Our experience of environments is always more complex than what can be captured in abstract concepts. Phenomenology and gestalt psychology offer ways of inquiring into our environmental experience and of letting our conceptual thinking about our relationship with nature be informed and enriched by that experience. By keeping our thinking about the human–nature relationship in touch with our experiencing of real places, we might be able to find better ways of conceptualizing our relationship with nature and of grasping the ethical demands that relationship makes on us.

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