

Boundaries of Self: Ecopsychology and Autistic Experience

Larissa Jamin-Lynn

ABSTRACT: Ecopsychology provides numerous ways to define the boundary between self and environment, including the idea of an expanded self that incorporates the natural world into one's self-perception. Within ecopsychology, this concept is primarily approached from a neurotypical perspective. It is, however, valuable to consider the experience of Autistic individuals through this lens, particularly in relation to sensory experience. I propose that many Autistics experience a highly permeable self-environment boundary leading to self-identification that includes environment and heightened sensory input. I draw primarily from the ideas of Arne Naess (1995) on expanding spheres of self-identification and Theodore Roszak's (1995) concept of the ecological unconscious to illustrate this. Additional support is provided by considering the lived experience of Autistic individuals, including the author. Very few published works examine Autistic experience as described by Autistics, which is critical in presenting an accurate perspective. By viewing Autistic sensory experience through the framework of ecopsychology and using the described experiences of Autistic individuals, the resulting conclusions can support more respectful and Autistic-affirming practices and supports.

KEYWORDS: Ecopsychology, Autism, Autistic, Sensory experience

Many writers on ecopsychology have devoted considerable time and energy into pondering how the boundary between self and environment is defined, including what this boundary means for humanity's relationship with the natural world. To some, like James Hillman (1995), this is not just one question for psychology to grapple with, but rather *the* question. If we consider this query within the context of human neurodiversity, the possibility emerges that there are a variety of ways that this boundary is experienced and can be defined. One of these experiences is that of the Autistic¹ person. The ways in which Autistic people connect to their environment are particularly similar to Arne Naess's (1995) concept of the expanded self and Theodore Roszak's (1995) concept of the ecological unconscious. Using ecopsychology as a lens to view neurodivergence provides further understanding of how Autistics experience their environment, which could then be used to create more effective and respectful approaches to therapy.

The writings of Naess and Roszak represent key insights into the question articulated by Hillman of where the bounds of the psyche are perceived. In *Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World*, Arne Naess (1995) argues that the use of the word self within modern culture is just another word for ego. To Naess (1995), the expression of mature human nature involves self-identification with other living things, which he describes as an ecological self that sits beyond the development from ego to social self to metaphysical self. It is a progression of expanding spheres incorporated into self-identification. According to Naess (1995) this ecological self can be encapsulated as "that which

¹ Identity first language, such as Autistic person rather than person with autism is used throughout in order to align with neurodiversity affirming practices and a dominant preference of those in the Autistic community.

this person identifies” (p. 226). This identification is as simple as a situation that evokes deep empathy in an individual for another living being (Naess, 1995).

With a slightly different perspective, Roszak (1995) perceives the expanded self as encompassing an ecological unconscious that exists at the heart of the human psyche. From this perspective, personal unconscious becomes an access point to a deep well of shared ecological knowledge. Roszak (2009) argues that the ecological unconscious is part of what defines humanity and “freeing the ecological unconscious may be the key to sanity in our time” (p. 36). When viewed through this lens, ecopsychology is about seeing our relationships and actions regarding the natural world as aspects of unconscious needs and desires (Roszak, 1995).

Although different in specifics, both Naess and Roszak conceive of a self that is broadly and inextricably connected to the natural world. This concept of expanded connection with environment is echoed in the experiences of many Autistic individuals through variations on a sense of “being in constant conversation with every aspect of [their] environment” (Silentmiaow, 2007, 3:41). According to Naess (1995), the richness of reality is such that we can only take in so much at once, and different aspects of the environment are perceived in different emotional states. This idea seems to represent an allistic² perspective. One way to conceive of the Autistic mind is to consider that the Autistic mind perceives its environment all at once in its entirety.³ Recent research is beginning to understand what Autistics have long known; that the Autistic mind experiences things as wholistic and non-hierarchical (Sibeoni et al., 2022). The inability to disentangle environment and sensory experience can be considered universal to humanity (Sibeoni et al., 2022); however, the lived experience of Autistics indicates that this entanglement is further entrenched in the Autistic mind. Autistics describe experiencing their environment as an inextricable combination of sensory and emotional aspects that are both immediate and all encompassing (Sibeoni et al., 2022).

In *The Ecopsychology of Child Development* Anita

Barrows (1995) identifies the developmental task of a child is to “simultaneously build enough of a membrane around herself to be able to function in her culture and allow that membrane to be permeable enough, receptive enough to sensation, feeling, communion” (p. 105). According to this statement, it seems that the membrane that Autistics develop has a different degree of permeability than that of allistics. A natural environment, which often has softer edges and more space for sound, can be less of an assault to the Autistic sensory system; whereas an urban environment often necessitates the use of artificially created barriers such as headphones, control of surrounding smells, or other adaptations that create a controlled barrier for the individual. This exertion of personal control serves to minimize the permeability of self to a manageable degree for the Autistic individual (Sibeoni et al., 2022).

From the perspective of ecopsychology, evidence for human-environment connection is given by Naess (1995) as he describes how resettlement in Norway led to the loss of identity for individuals, due to their identity being tied to and defined by their environment. On a smaller scale, Autistic individuals can experience a temporary disturbance of identity when displaced from a chosen activity or environment. It is common for Autistic individuals to experience difficulty and take more time when transitioning between places or activities. This can be due to the increased self-environment permeability that Autistics experience. In transition, the Autistic individual needs to extricate their identity from said activity or environment. Naess (1995) describes destruction of nature as something that “threatens our innermost self” (p. 232), akin to how Autistics often experience change: as a fundamental threat to the self.

From this perspective, Autistic sensory overload can be framed as the individual’s self being overwhelmed by the environment through a high degree of self-permeability and blurring of the boundary between self-identity and environment. This could be indicative of the overwhelming nature of the individual’s environment and a deeply urgent need for a more harmonious interaction with the environment. It is important to note that for many

² The term allistic refers to any person who is not Autistic.

³ Observations on Autistic experience made without citation are based on the lived experience of the author, who is Autistic, and the lived experiences of others in the Autistic community.

Autistics, human-centric environments are more overwhelming than natural environments, particularly when the individual is not permitted to interact in ways that feel natural to them. Allistic society dictates what type of interactions with environment are appropriate in what situations. For an Autistic individual to act outside of these bounds is to risk being labeled out of touch with one's surroundings and being non-communicative (Silentmiaow, 2007). However, for many Autistics, to interact with one's surroundings according to what is expected by society is limiting and involves reacting to only certain parts of the environment (Silentmiaow, 2007). In *A Psyche the Size of the Earth*, James Hillman (1995) states that any "cut between the self and natural world is arbitrary" (p. xix) and uses the example of borderline disorders to show the existence of states of the human psyche wherein the personality is in a state outside the limits typically set by psychology. The Autistic experience of environment is often outside of these bounds, involving intense self-environment permeability.

In identifying the similarities between Autistic experience and ecopsychology ideas of self, the conversation regarding how best to support Autistic individual's changes. For example, the need for time to transition makes more sense when framed as the need to extricate oneself from one's surroundings due to increased permeability of self and increased self-environment identification. Use of this concept as a framework could act as a way for Autistics to understand their own sensory experiences and for allistic therapists to have empathy for their clients and offer appropriate supports. Additionally, the assault of human-centric environments compared to natural environments could be used to emphasize natural elements when considering therapeutic spaces for Autistic people. The idea of natural spaces also need not mean strictly wild nature, which comes with its own overwhelming aspects such as rain, strong winds, and extreme temperatures, all of which may be challenging for some Autistics. Indoor spaces could be designed to emphasize the calm aspects of nature by using filtered natural lighting, varying textures, and natural sounds. This approach could transform an urban therapy setting into a safer and more regulating environment. This is not to say that this would be an ideal environment for every Autistic

person, but it could be part of increasing consciously accessible therapeutic spaces. Critical to this process is incorporating ecopsychology perspectives into ongoing research of the Autistic experience to better capture a complete scope of lived experience.

Overall, it appears that ecopsychology has a significant amount to offer as a lens through which to view Autistic experience. The writings of Naess and Roszak on self-environmental boundaries provide insight into the sensory experiences of Autistic individuals as a form of self-permeability, as does the work of Barrows on development of a membrane between self and environment. All of these, when taken together as considerations for Hillman's question of where the boundary between the self and the other is, lead to a more interconnected view of Autistic sensory experience. It could be beneficial to not only Autistic individuals, but allistic individuals as well, to incorporate these ideas into the therapeutic setting. Arguably even more important is to incorporate these ideas into the dominant understanding of Autistic experience. This could help to engender understanding within allistic society of Autistic experience and therefore positively impact acceptance of human diversity.

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