

Nerds Gone Wild: Step Environmental Psychology Summer School

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I first learned about the Step Summer School in the Netherlands from my Brazilian friend, Fabio Iglesias, who joined our Environmental Psychology lab here in Victoria for a year. When he first arrived, Leila, Christine, Angel, he and I (Environmental Psychology grad students) formed a formal group that met regularly to discuss environmental psychology papers, research questions, stats problems and other things that only scientists and researchers might find fun. Basically, we were a bunch of nerds and so our regular gathering came to be known as “nerd lunch.” We didn’t mind, in fact, we embraced the term and happily endorsed it. Going to go see a guest lecture became a “nerd field trip” and practicing our CPA presentations was a form of “nerd-ertainment.” So when Fabio got word of the Step Environmental Psychology summer school in the Netherlands he insisted that this was a must-attend event for us nerds. Before arriving, we thought that we were nerds, but nothing really brings out the inner nerd like meeting other nerds. That’s why this is the story of *Nerds Gone Wild*.

We started our trip in Amsterdam, the city where one can do just about anything. Of course, we took care to see the standard tourist spots – Ann Frank’s house, the red light district, the restaurants, the bars and the coffee shops – but we couldn’t help discussing everything in Environmental Psychology terms. “I wonder if a man-made building can have a restorative effect?” “this city has low legibility,” and “do you think we could ever get this many people to ride bikes in Victoria?” This last issue, cycling, was truly a site to behold. The Dutch have near perfect conditions to ride bikes and they have really taken full advantage of that fact. A bicycle parkade two stories tall next to the train station was packed to the brim with cruiser-style no-gear bikes, and everywhere you looked people of all ages were riding (we later learned that this was the case across the Netherlands – in the northern city where school took place 50% of people ride their bike to work).



Our next stop was Groningen, two hours north of Amsterdam, where the summer school was set to take place. While we may have thought that our group from Victoria were kind of nerdy, we were very excited to see that all around the world were other grad students *just like us!* From the moment we arrived, conversations did not take the form of basic chit chat about the weather, home countries, or world sports. Even basic small talk centred on social norm theories, the restorative properties of nature, pro-environmental behaviour, and other Environmental Psychology principles. Of course this was fostered by the amazing schedule of lectures and workshops led by prominent researchers in many areas.

The basic day consisted of attending a keynote lecture or two in the morning followed by smaller workshops, and then another lecture in the afternoon. The lectures were excellent and served to enhance our understanding of concepts in many domains of Environmental Psychology. I found keynote addresses by Wesley Schultz and John Thørgensen on social norms and pro-environmental behaviour particularly interesting as they happened to relate to my own research. They discussed both their current research on employing social norm information to encourage pro-environmental behaviour and a review of the literature on the subject. I also highly enjoyed Birgitta Gatersleben's talk on how materialism is connected to Swartz' values and pro-environmental behaviour. Apparently, materialism is related to self-enhancement, while environmentalism is related to the opposing concept of self-transcendence (a fact that you might only really find interesting if you are a fellow nerd). Other keynote speakers included Agnes van den Berg (landscape preferences), Phil Lehman (social influence), Judith de Groot (values), Yannick Joye (perceptual fluency), Jens Schade (transportation pricing), Annika Nordlund (reducing car use), and Sebastian Bamberg (transportation). All of the lectures were excellent and can be viewed, along with their PowerPoint slides and abstracts at:

<http://www.rug.nl/psy/onderwijs/firststep/keynote%20lectures>

Each of the keynote speakers was also a workshop leader. In total, there were five workshops with about 12 people in each. Each workshop had a sponsor which donated money in exchange for the opportunity to have an issue they presented discussed (Eneco, City of Groningen, SenterNovem, Transumo, and the Ministry of Housing/Spatial Planning/Environment). The purpose of the workshops was to discuss theories in Environmental Psychology and use them to develop a research proposal that would be presented to the sponsor (and the whole group) at the end of the week. The proposal would provide solutions to the sponsor's problem and research that could be conducted to improve future proposals. Each workshop focused on theories that the leader was an expert in (Values, norms and household energy use; Changing behaviour via community approaches; Strategies to reduce household energy use; Transport pricing; Restorative environments), but were generally self-guided.

Despite being nervous at first about this self-guided style of learning (some might call it Problem-Based Learning) where we determined our own timeline and progress, I quickly found that it was very effective and that I really enjoyed learning from my fellow students. By the end of the week we presented a coherent research project, and learned a great deal about various theories in Environmental Psychology.

Of course, anyone who's been to university knows that school is not just about books – and that was the case in the Netherlands as well. An extremely detailed social program was arranged for us that included extravagant dinners, complimentary beverages and nightly activities – all geared towards encouraging networking between participants. As a social science researcher, I was ill-prepared for the luxury afforded to students with this program. Like most social science students I expected no more than a cheap place to stay and perhaps a dinner on the first night (drinks extra, naturally). Instead, what we found were extravagant meals every night, canal trips and free drinks at every opportunity. On the last night there was even a school party, and I must admit that it was lots of fun cutting a rug with the likes of Linda Steg and John Thøgersen who I had, until this summer, only recognized as names atop well-known Environmental Psychology journal articles.

All in all, the week was an incredible success. I learned a lot, made new friends, connected with the future leaders in Environmental Psychology, and shared some good times. A hearty “well done” is in order for Linda Steg and the entire organizing committee who put together the Step Summer School (I'm told it took two years to get it off the ground). I look forward with great anticipation to *the next Step!*



See more summer school pictures here:
<http://picasaweb.google.nl/summerschoolfirststep>