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From Spiritual Intelligence to Psychoecological Resilience: Pathways to Ecological Sustainability

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ABSTRACT: Growing awareness of environmental change has been accompanied by ecological anxiety, a psychological response that can lead to distress, avoidance, or disengagement. This conceptual paper introduces psychoecological resilience, the capacity of individuals to adapt psychologically and behaviourally to ecological adversity, and questions which inner capacities allow such resilience to emerge. Spiritual intelligence is proposed as a foundational capacity underlying psychoecological resilience. Through meaning-making, ecological ethics, interconnectedness with nature, and transcendental awareness, spiritual intelligence is argued to support two connected pathways: adaptive coping, which helps individuals reappraise and regulate ecological stress, and sustainable behaviour, which turns care for nature into action. These pathways reinforce one another and together contribute to ecological sustainability, with psychoecological resilience appearing as the dynamic expression of this process. The paper presents a conceptual model of these relationships and discusses its implications. Future research is recommended to test this conceptual framework, thereby contributing to the growing literature on sustainable behavioural practices. By linking inner resources to outer action, the framework offers a starting point for research and practice on psychological adaptation to ecological change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecological balance is essential for the survival of all living organisms. Yet shifting climate patterns, declining biodiversity and exhaustion of natural resources increasingly threaten this balance and undermine the stability of ecosystems. The ecological imbalance is driven largely by human behaviour contributing to the global crisis. As Stokols et al., (2009) point out, human beings' psychological responses determine how well they can adapt to and recover from this crisis.

Resilience represents an important psychological process that helps individuals navigate the disruption by transforming the struggles into growth. As Rutter, (2012) proposed, resilience functions as a protective mechanism that can change, reduce, or positively influence how an individual responds to environmental stressors, thereby reducing the risk of negative outcomes. Resilience is a dynamic process that helps individuals adapt to changing situations (Masten et al., 1990). Within a psychoecological framework, resilience is described as a person's or community's capability to adjust effectively to ecological and environmental challenges (Adger, 2000; Berkes & Ross, 2013; Stanley et al., 2021). The bridge between inner strength and outer connectedness, as represented through psychoecological resilience, opens into the domain of spiritual intelligence, as spiritual intelligence represents the capacity to navigate everyday life with deeper awareness and purpose, drawing on inner values, compassion, and a sense of interconnectedness to guide thoughts, decisions, and actions (Amram, 2022).

This paper proposes a conceptual model linking spiritual intelligence, psychoecological resilience, and ecological sustainability by explaining how inner capacities such as meaning-making, ecological ethics, interconnectedness with nature, and transcendent awareness enable individuals to cope adaptively with ecological stress and to engage in sustainable behaviour.

Ecological Crisis

Ecological crisis denotes a critical state in which the natural environment undergoes a widespread and severe deterioration due to human activities and natural events. Ecological crisis threatens the balance of life on Earth, affecting the health, survival and well-being of all species, including humans. The rapid development of technology has led to increased energy consumption, thereby highlighting the link between unsustainable use of natural resources and ecological crisis (Whitmee et al., 2015).

Research in public health documents various health risks associated with ecological crises, such as poor water management, climate and habitat changes, exposure to pollutants such as pesticides and other toxic substances, and improper waste disposal mechanisms leading to environmental degradation (Landrigan et al., 2018).

Ecological Anxiety

Ecological anxiety, also called eco-anxiety, is the distress, apprehension, and concern people experience in response to environmental degradation and its consequences. Past researchers identified two distinct phenomena of eco-anxiety: non-clinical eco-anxiety and a pathological form of eco-anxiety. Researchers opined that the non-clinical form of eco-anxiety acts as 'practical anxiety', which leads to behaviour changes, adopting more ecologically sustainable acts (Pihkala, 2020). However, the pathological form of eco-anxiety may be understood as a response to the perceived inevitability of ecological change and the uncertainty surrounding it. As Clayton et al., (2017) described, ecoanxiety is an anticipated fear of climate change. This effect is more indirect, as Clayton (2020) observed; people may experience distress about climate change regardless of whether they have personally experienced its impacts or are directly at risk (Clayton, 2020).

Thus, past research delineated eco-anxiety into two forms: one that helps people engage in ecologically sustainable behaviours and the second that increases pathological reactions to ecological changes. It can be argued that the practical aspects of eco-anxiety need to be increased to drive people to engage in sustainable behaviours as well as cope with the pathological form of eco-anxiety. This paper positions psychoecological resilience as a protective factor, of which the practical form of eco-anxiety is a part, and which enables adaptive coping and promotes sustainable ecological behaviour despite the psychological challenges posed by eco-anxiety.

The Concept of Psychoecological Resilience:

Researchers have well established the adverse physiological and psychological effects of ecological crisis (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). These effects range from physical illness and injury linked to extreme weather to trauma, depression, anxiety, and the distress of losing familiar landscape, termed solastalgia (Albrecht et al., 2007). The unsettling facet of the ecological crisis is its dynamic, ongoing nature, which makes it difficult for people to adapt to the changes. Unlike a single traumatic event, the crisis has no clear endpoint, so people are repeatedly exposed to new threats and an uncertain future (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). This dynamic nature, in turn, increases the anxiety further. It is essential to delineate the internal resources necessary to cope and adapt to ever-changing environmental and climatic changes.

Unique to its nature, eco-anxiety itself has two components: first, the pathological anxiety that leads to adverse mental health outcomes, and second, the practical anxiety that helps individuals to cope and develop ecologically helpful behaviours (Pihkala, 2020). Practical anxiety is a proportionate, future-oriented concern that directs attention to real threats and prompts action, whereas pathological anxiety is persistent and overwhelming and interferes with daily functioning (Clayton, 2020). The practical component of eco-anxiety can lead to psychoecological resilience is a unique personal strength which promotes sustainable behaviours as well as coping with the adverse effects of environmental degradation.

Psychoecological resilience, at a conceptual level, integrates psychological adaptability with ecological awareness to help individuals and communities cope well with ongoing environmental disruptions. It draws on the broader resilience literature but adds an ecological dimension: an awareness of one's dependence on, and responsibility toward, the natural world. Resilience is widely understood not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process through which individuals draw on personal, social, and contextual resources to adapt to adversity (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001), and social-ecological research similarly describes resilience as the continuing capacity of systems to adapt and transform under change (Folke, 2006; Walker et al., 2004).

Adaptation to environmental stressors indicates the capacity of individuals to maintain psychological well-being despite exposure to environmental stressors. Resilience theories as proposed by Masten et al., (1990) indicate flexibility, recovery and growth in response to adversity. Resilience is understood here as the product of ordinary adaptive processes rather than a rare or exceptional trait (Masten, 2001), and many people show resilient trajectories even after serious adversity (Bonanno, 2004). Thus, psychoecological resilience helps people develop adaptive coping mechanisms that can evolve with changing circumstances, reducing vulnerability to eco-anxiety and related distress.

Integration of meaning-making and ethical awareness provides that key internal resource which helps people to interpret environmental challenges through a lens of ethical responsibility and interconnectedness with nature. Meaning-making allows individuals to reappraise stressful events so that they fit with their wider beliefs and goals (Park, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997), while ethical awareness recognizes that environmental harm carries moral implications for other species and future generations (Stern, 2000). This integration refers to a cognitive-emotional framework which brings a deeper sense of purpose and motivates sustainable behaviours.

Beyond individual adaptation, psychoecological resilience drives ecological sustainability by linking resilience with pro-environmental action. As indicated in past research, resilience enhances motivation to engage in behaviours that help cope with or mitigate the impact on mental health (Ojala, 2012; Verplanken & Roy, 2013); psychoecological resilience may promote motivation to engage in conservation practices, advocacy, and lifestyle changes aligned with ecological principles, as adaptive and meaning-focused coping has been linked to greater environmental engagement (Stanley et al., 2021). This matters because concern about the environment does not automatically lead to action (Gifford, 2011; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), and sustained emotional regulation may help close this gap between concern and behaviour.

Psychoecological resilience can be seen as the set of protective psychological processes that help individuals manage their emotional reactions to ecological crisis, thereby reducing the likelihood of outcomes such as persistent anxiety, depression, or helplessness by promoting adaptive coping strategies (Clayton, 2020). These strategies resemble those described by Rutter (2012), in which individuals adopt problem-solving and emotion-regulation strategies and seek social support within communities. They also correspond to the problem-focused and emotion-focused forms of coping described in stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Even though psychoecological resilience is conceptualized as an individual construct, it extends to communities and collective resilience by emphasizing collective adaptation and social cohesion in the face of ecological adversity. Collective resilience includes shared values, cultural narratives, and community-based initiatives that strengthen the capacity to respond to external challenges collectively (Stokols et al., 2009). In this sense, individual and community resources support each other, and the capacity of social-ecological systems to adapt depends partly on the people within them (Adger, 2000).

Thus, while past research has emphasized resilience in explaining adaptation to ecological adversities, an important theoretical question concerns the psychological capacities that enable such resilience to emerge.

Spiritual Intelligence

Spiritual Intelligence refers to the human capacity to seek meaning, purpose, and connectedness beyond the immediate material world, and to apply these insights to everyday life (Emmons, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Spiritual intelligence extends beyond religiosity and encompasses self-awareness, compassion, ethical sensitivity, and an experience of belonging to a larger whole (Emmons, 2000; King & DeCicco, 2009; Vaughan, 2002; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Individuals with high levels of spiritual intelligence tend to draw on transcendent values to interpret adversity, make sense of loss and uncertainty, and act with integrity and humility (Amram, 2022). This capacity helps individuals to connect with and experience a moral responsibility toward nature, thereby positioning spiritual intelligence as an inner resource that shapes how people perceive, endure, and respond to environmental change.

Spiritual intelligence represents the foundational inner capacity of human beings, thereby shaping how people interpret environmental stress. Emmons (2000) described spirituality as comprising of five dimensions: transcendence, heightened consciousness, sanctification of daily life, the use of spiritual resources in problem-solving, and virtuous conduct, including compassion, humility, and forgiveness (Emmons, 2000, p.10). Along these lines, King (2009) delineated four measurable components of spiritual intelligence: critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion. Other models add self-awareness, wise and ethical action, and a felt sense of connection to a larger

whole (Y. Amram & Dryer, 2008; Vaughan, 2002). Together, these components contribute to those inner resources that enable individuals to find purpose, act with integrity, and experience a sense of belonging beyond the self.

Within the stress-coping framework, inner capacities such as meaning-making and a sense of purpose shape how individuals appraise a stressor, so that it is seen as a manageable challenge rather than an overwhelming threat (Folkman, 1984; R. S. Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). By strengthening a sense of coherence and perceived meaningfulness, the inner resources also support emotion regulation and sustained, adaptive responses to stress instead of avoidance or helplessness (Antonovsky, 1987; Park, 2010).

Proposed Pathway A: Spiritual Intelligence leading to Adaptive Coping

Meaning-making: Spiritual intelligence helps people reappraise environmental stressors such as climate anxiety, loss of habitat, and disasters as events that can be given purpose rather than as pure threats (Park, 2010).

Transcendental awareness: Spiritual intelligence enables people to have a wider perspective (King & DeCicco, 2009), thereby reducing feelings of helplessness and promoting acceptance and hope.

Self-awareness: Spiritual intelligence helps people recognize and regulate emotions (King & DeCicco, 2009; Wigglesworth, 2014) such as eco-anxiety, grief and anger.

Together, spiritual intelligence has the ability to enable problem-focused coping by promoting meaning-making, emotional regulation, and sustained engagement rather than avoidance or denial.

Proposed Pathway B: Spiritual Intelligence leading to Sustainable Behaviour

Interconnectedness with nature: Spiritual intelligence helps an individual feel themselves as a part of the natural world, which strengthens the concern for ecological sustainability (Zohar & Marshall, 2000).

Ecological ethics: Spiritual intelligence enhances moral responsibility and compassion that extend to non-human life and also toward future generations (Emmons, 2000; Vaughan, 2002).

Value Activation: As Stern (2000) suggests, connections with nature and altruistic values, combined with a sense of personal obligation, drive environmentally significant behaviour.

Together, people with high levels of spiritual intelligence may adopt conservation, reduced consumption, stewardship, and pro-environmental advocacy.

Pathways to Ecological Sustainability:

Thus, as proposed, spiritual intelligence as an internal strength, on the one hand, will lead to adaptive coping and, on the other hand, will increase sustainable behaviour.

However, adaptive coping and sustainable behaviour do not operate in isolation. They form a mutually reinforcing loop through which spiritual intelligence sustains ecological sustainability. Adaptive coping, rooted in meaning-making and transcendent awareness, helps individuals regulate eco-anxiety and avoid disengagement, which in turn keeps them motivated to act on environmental problems over the long term (Ojala, 2012; Park, 2010). On the other hand, engaging in sustainable behaviour gives people a sense of purpose, efficacy and moral integrity, which strengthens their capacity to cope with further ecological stress (Stern, 2000). Both these processes draw on the same inner resources, including interconnectedness with nature and ecological ethics and move together rather than separately. This cycle will turn the short-term ecological crisis responses into lasting patterns of care for the environment (Ives et al., 2018). At the collective level, such inner transformations in values and worldview can spread through communities and support wider sustainability change (Woiwode et al., 2021).

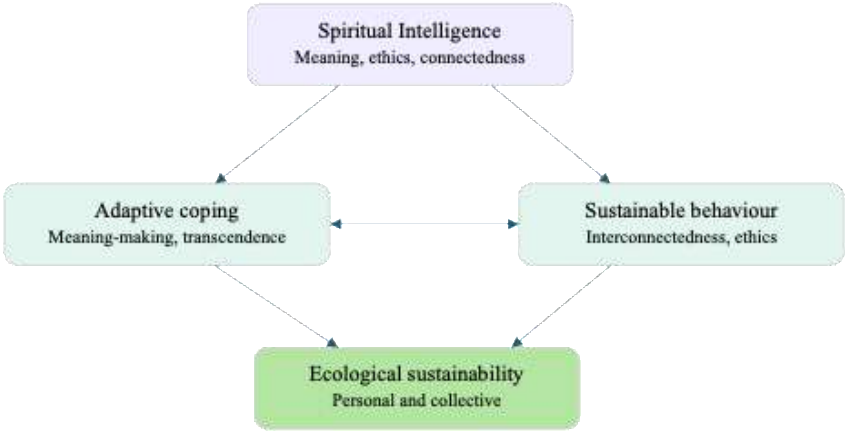


Figure 1: Ecopsychological Resilience – The Dynamic Expression

Figure 1 indicates the loop through which spiritual intelligence leads to ecological sustainability. Adaptive coping is reflected in how people manage burnout and disengagement and adopt sustainable behaviour, and sustainable behaviour gives a sense of efficacy and purpose, which strengthens coping. Via both these pathways, spiritual intelligence enhances ecological sustainability. Psychoecological resilience is the visible expression of these pathways: how spiritual intelligence supplies the required capacities, coping and behaviour leading to the long-term outcome, which is ecological sustainability or sustainable ecological engagement. Together, these pathways suggest that how people respond to ecological threat depends less on the stressor itself than on the inner resources they bring to it. When spiritual intelligence is high, ecological anxiety can become a source of meaning and responsibility instead of withdrawal. Psychoecological resilience appears as continued coping and care for the environment. The proposed model has practical value because spiritual intelligence is seen as a capacity that can be developed rather than a fixed trait (Wigglesworth, 2014). Research suggests that spiritual intelligence can be enhanced in different contexts (Pinto et al., 2023). If spiritual intelligence can be strengthened through reflective, contemplative, and values-based practices, the proposed model suggests that enhanced spiritual intelligence may result in increased sustainable ecological engagement and behaviour practices. Of course, this model needs further testing. Future studies could examine whether spiritual intelligence predicts both adaptive coping and pro-environment behaviour, whether the two pathways explain its link with sustainability outcomes, and whether their reinforcing loop holds over time.

Despite theoretically linking spiritual intelligence with sustainable behaviours, this paper poses certain limitations. The proposed model is based on existing literature and conceptual reasoning and has not yet been tested empirically. The relationships proposed here remain propositions rather than established findings. Spiritual intelligence is defined and measured in different ways and is highly contextual, with cultural variations leading to operationalization difficulties in future research. The proposed model did not account for socioeconomic and cultural factors, access to resources, and the severity of the ecological threat, which may impact how a person copes and acts. Also, psychoecological resilience may be influenced by other personal factors and resources apart from spiritual intelligence, contributing to differences in pathways across groups.

CONCLUSION

Psychoecological resilience, understood as the dynamic expression of spiritual intelligence, presents individuals as active participants in ecological adaptation rather than passive recipients of environmental stress. By linking inner resources to outer action, the framework suggests that building meaning, ethical awareness, and a sense of connection with nature can support both personal well-being and ecological sustainability. Further empirical research is required to substantiate this model. Nevertheless, the proposed model offers a promising direction for future research and practice in the face of ecological change.

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