Overview

The term, ecology, pertains broadly to the interrelations between organisms and their environments. From its early roots in biology, the ecological paradigm has evolved within several disciplines to provide a general framework for understanding the nature of people’s transactions with their physical and sociocultural surroundings. The field of social ecology gives greater attention to the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of people-environment relations than did earlier versions of human ecology, which were more closely oriented to economic factors, biological processes, and the geographic environment.

The academic mission of the School of Social Ecology is to train students to analyze research and policy questions from a broad, ecological perspective that integrates multiple disciplines and links basic theory and research with community problem-solving. In keeping with this mission, the present course offers a broad overview of social ecology as a framework for cross-disciplinary research and community problem-solving. The assigned readings and class discussions highlight core principles and over-arching themes inherent in the social ecological perspective.

Initial readings trace the roots of the ecological paradigm in various disciplines and provide an historical perspective on the development of social ecology as a multidisciplinary field, both at UCI and beyond. Subsequent course sessions examine conceptual and methodological principles of social ecology and systems theory, including the concepts of interdependence, multi-level analysis of people-environment transactions, and the contextual scope of theory, research, and community intervention. Also, distinctions between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research are discussed. Examples of social ecological theories, research projects, and
community interventions are examined from the perspectives of Social Ecology’s academic departments and programs: Criminology, Law and Society; Psychology and Social Behavior; Planning, Policy, and Design; and the Program in Public Health. Finally, the implications of social ecological analyses for understanding contemporary societal and environmental changes are discussed.

Course Requirements

Students are expected to carefully review all assigned readings listed in the attached course calendar prior to discussion of those readings in class; and to attend and participate actively in class discussions each week (10 points). A course reader containing the assigned readings and some of the optional ones is available for purchase from University Readers on-line at http://www.universityreaders.com.

Two in-class essays will be completed on October 20 and November 10, focusing on the lectures and readings covered during weeks 1-3, and 4-6, respectively (20 points each).

You are also required to submit either an individual or team term project by the 10th week of the quarter (on December 1). Individuals and teams have the option of submitting either: (1) an term paper plus references (9-10 pp. for individuals; 18-20 pp. for teams); or (2) a powerpoint presentation (of about 18-20 slides) and an annotated bibliography containing at least five annotated references (with a brief paragraph highlighting the main points covered in each of the annotated articles). If you choose the team option, teams may consist of between 2-4 students and must include individuals representing at least two different disciplinary backgrounds or departmental affiliations within the School.

For both individual and team projects, you are expected to develop a transdisciplinary, social ecological analysis of a particular community problem or public policy issue. The term project will count for 50 points toward your final grade in the course.

A 1-2 page outline of your proposed project is due by the 6th week of the quarter (on November 3). The outlines can be concise (i.e., a 1-2 page outline of topics that will be covered in your paper or powerpoint presentation). The outline should make clear your goals for the project in relation to the issues listed below—your analysis of these issues constitute the main elements of your project and should be explicitly addressed in your paper or powerpoint presentation:

(1) the environmental or community topic/problem you will address and why it is societally significant (i.e., warrants study and possibly research-based interventions to alleviate the problem);

(2) why would a social ecological approach to the topic or problem be advantageous?

(3) in what respects will your approach to the problem be social ecological?--i.e., what specific principle/s of social ecological analysis will be emphasized in your approach to
the problem? Which concepts and methods will be used in your theoretical analysis and/or proposed study or community intervention?

(4) in what ways do you expect your project to reflect an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach to the topic or problem (and after completing the project, were those expectations met)?

(5) what are the potential policy implications of your conceptual analysis and/or proposed research or program evaluation?

(6) list any key publications or other sources that you will draw upon as you develop your project (this listing can be a partial rather than complete bibliography for your project; the more complete version can be turned in with your project on December 4).

(7) Please send me and Mark an electronic version (e.g., MS Word file) of your term project outline so that we can add comments to your outline using the "track changes" function in Word, and return the outline with my comments. For team projects, we just need one electronic copy from each team, rather than multiple printed copies of the outline from each team member. Please list all team members' names and e-mail addresses at the top of the first page of your outline.
Section I. Historical and Conceptual Foundations of Social Ecology

The first section of the course reviews key developments in the history of Social Ecology, both as an interdisciplinary field and as an academic unit at UCI. Conceptual and methodological principles of ecological research are discussed.

Week 1  
September 29


http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/newsrel/soc/07-07ObesityIK-.asp  
http://content.nejm.org/content/vol357/issue4/images/data/370/DC2/NEJM_Christakis_370v1.swf  
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/trend/maps/


[http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/337/dec04_2/a2338](http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/337/dec04_2/a2338)


Also, the Internet sites listed below provide additional information about the principles and themes of Social Ecology. See for example the Conceptual Social Ecology web page, the working definitions of Social Ecology posted at the SE275 site.

**Conceptual Social Ecology:**  
[http://www.soceco.uci.edu/cse/cse.html](http://www.soceco.uci.edu/cse/cse.html)

**Interdisciplinary Research in Social Ecology (SE275):**  

**Institute for Social Ecology**  

**Discussion Questions:**

What are the core principles or themes of ecological analysis? Are the principles of community structure proposed by the Chicago School human ecologists generalizable to urban areas throughout the US and beyond? What are some of the strengths and limitations of applying biological principles to the analysis of human communities? What societal circumstances contributed to the development of the Program in Social Ecology at UC Irvine during the early 1970s; and the obesity epidemic between 1980-present? In what respects does the Irvine School of Social Ecology incorporate or depart from earlier formulations of human ecology?

**Week 2**

**October 6**

**Scope of Ecological Inquiry**


Optional:


Discussion Questions:

To what extent does the School of Social Ecology at UCI address Michelson's criticisms of earlier perspectives on human ecology? Which assumptions emphasized by the Chicago School human ecologists are challenged by Firey's analysis of sentiment and symbolism and Lynch's study of urban imageability? In what respects do biomes, behavior settings, and urban communities constitute ecological units of analysis? What are the distinctive attributes of contextual analyses of people-environment relations? What is meant by the *contextual scope* of a theory, research project, or community intervention? What are some of the ways in which global environmental, technological, and social changes are altering the structure and functioning of people's local environments?
Week 3  
October 13  

**Systems Theory as a Basis for Social Ecological Research: Homeostasis, Disequilibrium, and Deviation Amplification**

**Assignment:**  


**Optional:**  


**Discussion Questions:**  
What are the distinctive properties of open systems as outlined by Miller and Katz & Kahn? How do Milgram's analysis of urban life,
Selye's conceptualization of stress, Bales' model of group dynamics, and Wynne-Edwards' theory of internal checks on population size exemplify system processes? In what ways do Maruyama's and Weick's analyses extend earlier formulations of systems theory? What are the strengths and limitations of systems theory as a framework for social ecological research?

**Week 4**  
**October 20**

**Essay #1**  
(*covering readings and lectures during weeks 1-3*)

**Assignment:**


**Optional:**


See also the following web sites on environmental justice and the new urbanism:

[http://www.umich.edu/~snre492/index.html](http://www.umich.edu/~snre492/index.html)  
[http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/](http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/)  

**Discussion Questions:**

Interdependence between the physical and social dimensions of environments is a core theme in systems theory. In what respects is the interdependence between physical and social features of environments variable or constant? How do Altman’s analysis of privacy, Appleyard’s study of residential streets, Baum et al.’s analysis of technological and natural disasters, and Newman’s theory of defensible space reflect the interdependent influence of the physical and social environment on behavior and well-being? What assumptions about the joint influence of physical and social environmental conditions are evident in Bullard’s conceptualization of environmental racism and in Katz’ formulation of the “new urbanism” as a framework for urban planning?

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**Week 5**

**Disciplines, Paradigms, and Cross-Disciplinary Research**

**October 27**

**Assignment:**


National Cancer Institute Science of Team Science Resources and American Journal of Preventive Medicine 2008 Supplement on the Science of Team Science:


Discussion Questions: What criteria are used by Durkheim and Lewin to demarcate the disciplines of psychology and sociology? In what ways are the notions of "distinct scientific disciplines", "disciplinary boundaries", and reductionism relevant to the development of social ecological theories? How are the concepts of discipline, paradigm, and theory interrelated yet distinct? According to Campbell, what are the major factors that constrain or facilitate interdisciplinary research?
By what criteria does Rosenfield distinguish between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research? How have these criteria been operationalized in recent studies of cross-disciplinary scientific collaboration?

Section II. Applying Social Ecological Theory and Research to Community Problem-Solving

This section of the course examines applications of social ecological theory and research to the analysis and resolution of community problems, from the vantage point of Social Ecology's four academic departments.

Week 6
November 3
Social Ecological Analyses of Community Problems and Unintended Side Effects of Community Interventions

Assignment: *** Outlines of Term Projects Due***


See also the following web site on building capacity for community change: http://ctb.ku.edu/en/connect/

Discussion Questions: Compare and contrast the concepts of scientific and social validity. In what respects are the community interventions evaluated by Schulz & Hanusa's and Everett et al. socially valid or invalid? What is meant by the "ecological depth" of intervention outcomes? What circumstances enhance the sustainability of community interventions?

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Week 7  
November 10  

Action Research and the Development of Transformational Theories

Essay #2  
(covering readings and lectures during weeks 4-6)


Discussion Questions: The articles by Gergen and Platt suggest rather different criteria for gauging the value of scientific research. What are the key functions of theory according to these authors? Are Gergen's and Platt's assumptions about the usefulness of scientific theories compatible or mutually exclusive? What conceptual "tradeoffs" should be considered when developing theories of broad vs. narrow contextual scope? What are the distinguishing features of transformational vs. non-transformational theories of people-environment transactions?
Week 8
November 17

Social Ecological Analyses of Societal and Environmental Change

Assignment:


Optional:


See also the following web sites on Healthy Communities Programs, sponsored by the National Civic League; and the "Digital Divide" in America

http://www.ncl.org
http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/digitaldivide/

Discussion
**Questions:** What are some of the social, behavioral, and health consequences of society's increasing reliance on digital communications? What are the defining features of "social capital" discussed by Putnam? In what ways do telecommunications technologies either strengthen or erode the social capital of a community?

Week 9

**Presentation and Class Discussion of Term Projects - I**

**Assignment:** *First Set of Term Projects Submitted and Presented in Class*

Week 10

**Presentation and Class Discussion of Term Projects - II**

December 1

**Concluding Discussion of Course Themes**

**Assignment:** *Second Set of Term Projects Submitted and Presented in Class*