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Environment Through a Gendered Lens: From Person-in-Environment to Woman-in-Environment

Susan P. Kemp

Building on interdisciplinary work by critical and feminist scholars in geography, architecture and urban planning, and history, this article proposes a reworking of social work's person-environment formulation to incorporate gender and its implications more fully. Three interlocking domains are addressed: (a) women's subjective experiences of their everyday environments; (b) the connections among these environmental experiences, the geography of women's lives, and larger social categories such as race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation; and (c) women's environmental strengths, resources, and agency.

> Reworking the politics of gender also means reimagining their geographies.
>
> —Massey (1994, p. 182)

A focus on people in their environmental contexts is an essential, if not defining, feature of social work practice. This simultaneous commitment to person and environment is supported at all levels of the profession: in practice, in the professional literature, and in statements of the profession's purpose and mission (see, for example, DuBois & Miley, 1999; Hepworth,

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Rooney, & Larsen, 1997; or the preamble to the revised National Association of Social Workers [NASW] Code of Ethics [NASW, 1997]). Like many powerful and long-standing ideas, however, social work's person-environment formulation is ripe for reexamination.

In this article, the author argues that social work's prevailing conceptualizations of person-environment relationships gloss over important differences in people's environmental experiences, particularly those based in key axes of social identity, such as race or ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, this tendency to assume universality in environmental experience is supported by understandings of the environment that afford too little attention to the dynamic interactions among environmental contexts, personal and cultural experiences, and larger sociopolitical arrangements.

These arguments are presented from the perspective of women, whose particular environmental experiences—as refugees or immigrants, welfare recipients, homeless mothers, workers, or active participants in their communities—are often overlooked in social work theory and practice. As a key determinant of social power, gender (defined here as sexual difference that is socially organized or constructed) is deeply implicated in the ways in which environments are constituted and experienced by women and by men. A gendered analysis thus affords a critical starting point for examining and reworking the assumptions embedded in social work's ecological perspective. In feminist social work, as Bricker-Jenkins (1991, p. 4) noted, "continual self-scrutiny, challenge, and revision are not only ethical imperatives, but the essence of practice." Such analyses are essential to the development in social work discourse of more complex understandings of women's diverse environmental experiences and of the relationships between these experiences and women's roles, access to power and opportunities, and capacities for action.

This article has two primary goals: to provide social workers with conceptual tools that will enable them to *think* with more specificity and focus about women-environment relationships

and to connect this expanded conceptual framework to the realities of practice. These goals are reflected in the article's structure. A brief review of theoretical work in other disciplines is presented as a foundation for expanding social work's person-environment framework. The interdisciplinary research literature is then drawn on to elaborate on three areas that are central to the conceptual leap from "person in environment" to "woman in environment." First, the particularity and complexity of women's experiences in everyday environments, both public and private, are examined. Second, the ways in which these everyday environments, as integral components of systems of social power, both reflect and perpetuate larger social arrangements, including gender relationships, are explored. Third, the importance of recognizing and supporting women as active and empowered participants in their environmental contexts is discussed. Finally, the implications for social work practice of this multidimensional approach to women's environmental experiences and concrete suggestions and guidelines for assessing women-environment relationships are offered.

Although the article focuses on women, gender is not the only, or necessarily always the most salient, category of analysis for developing more nuanced and authentic understandings of women's environmental experiences. For women with disabilities, lesbians, or women of color, for example, other identities may provide more compelling frameworks than gender alone. Therefore, in the following sections, gender frequently is joined with other axes of experience in interpreting the relationships between women and their environmental contexts. Furthermore, given the rich variability in women's lives, it is not appropriate to assume that some experiences are common to *all* women. Indeed, given the analytical perspective used here, the author is as much concerned with teasing out differences among women as with understanding how women's experiences in their environments may be different from men's.

RETHINKING "ENVIRONMENT"

In the social work literature, discussions of person-environment relationships frequently rely on general language and concepts. The term *person* implies a universal subject of no identifiable gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or age. Similarly, the global term *environment* suggests a static context that most people experience in the same way. Although social workers are encouraged to tailor their assessments of clients' environments to reflect particular circumstances (see, for example, Hepworth et al., 1997), social work texts typically offer little content to support the development of assessments and interventions that respond fully to diversity and difference in environmental experiences.

The generic nature of many social work discussions of person-environment relationships is problematic on multiple levels. The primary concern is that these discussions contain assumptions about people and environments that reflect dominant cultural experiences and hence systematically obscure the experiences and perspectives of nondominant groups, such as women and people of color. Both feminist and postmodern theorists have asserted the need for a careful examination of the potent but taken-for-granted concepts around which disciplinary knowledge and practices are organized. Hidden in many apparently benign conceptual frameworks, these perspectives suggest, is a view of the world that is defined by dominant experiences, particularly those of the Western, White, and frequently male bourgeoisie. Young (1990) noted that these embedded, and thus taken-for-granted, cultural perspectives come to be seen as "normal, universal, unremarkable." Furthermore, they create "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972, cited in Bannerji, 1995) that render the experience of those who fall outside the norm invisible or deviant. Although their effects are less obvious than the impacts of what professionals actually do, universalizing conceptual frameworks thus play a powerful role in "promot[ing] the. . . continuous reproduction of established social practices" (Soja, 1989, p. 14).

The uncritical use of generic understandings of person-environment relationships in social work practice with women may perpetuate exclusionary, oppressive, and erroneous understandings of women's lives that not only undermine the profession's commitment to socially just and inclusive practice (Council on Social Work Education, 1994; NASW, 1997), but result in the formulation of incomplete or misdirected assessments and interventions. Judgments about order and disorder in households and communities or the extent to which a woman displays autonomy and control in her social and physical environment, for example, frequently reflect particular sociocultural perspectives about what is "good" or "appropriate" in person-environment relationships. Unexamined, such judgments may lead to interventions that are a poor fit with women's lived experience, particularly for women whose lives—as lesbians, women of color, or women with disabilities—are twice removed from dominant social norms and expectations, as in the following example:

> Laneta is a young African American mother who lives in run-down public housing in a historically Black urban neighborhood. Having graduated from a community-based welfare-to-work program, she is employed as a bank teller in a nearby White suburb. Laneta grew up in the neighborhood where she lives, attended high school there until she became pregnant with her first child, and has a wide network of extended family members nearby. A friend of her mother takes care of her children while she works. In Laneta's neighborhood, drugs, street violence, abandoned buildings, and numerous welfare-dependent families are markers of a community under extreme stress. The public housing authority is considering a major urban renewal project that would move many families to housing outside the community.

In neighborhoods such as Laneta's, which are socially isolated and beset with highly visible problems, helping professionals' assessments often become a laundry list of everything that is visibly wrong in the environment. Less focused on are the details of Laneta's experiences and history *in this place*, her

strategies for surviving in this environment, or the relation-
ships among her immediate experience, her cultural context,
and the larger cultural and spatial history of her community.
When such domains are overlooked, an array of factors that
may be highly relevant to the well-being of Laneta and her fam-
ily are lost to the assessment and intervention process. These
factors include the personal and environmental resources and
supports that are present even in "disorganized" communities;
the connections or disconnections women experience among
key spatial domains, such as home, work, and community
resources (like schools and child care); and the impacts of wider
sociospatial factors, such as inequalities in the housing market
or the location and accessibility of jobs.

The development of assessment models that better capture the
complexity and variability in women's environments depends,
therefore, on critical analysis of current person-environment
thinking *and* the expansion of prevailing frameworks. These
conceptual tasks go hand in hand. For content on diversity in
environmental experience to be fully incorporated into prac-
tice, the organizing assumptions embedded in social work's
person-environment discourse must first be opened up for
scrutiny and redefinition.

Key Concepts and Definitions

In social work theory and practice, definitions of the environ-
ment typically reflect the understanding that it has multiple
dimensions and levels, from the immediate social and physical
environment (both natural and built) to larger social and political
systems (Germain, 1979). Although most of these definitions
emphasize the transactional nature of person-environment
relationships, practitioners have tended to focus on readily
observable aspects of clients' immediate environments (Kemp,
1994). To move toward a more dynamic and complex view of
the social ecology of practice, Kemp, Whittaker, and Tracy
(1997) argued that understandings of the environment should
include attention to the social construction of the environment
through individual and collective systems of meaning and belief,

as well as awareness that environments are implicated in larger social relationships, such as relationships of power. No environment, in other words, can be understood in isolation from the personal and cultural experiences of the people within it or the larger sociopolitical arrangements that shape and are shaped by this everyday experience.

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship provides a robust foundation for this expanded perspective. In addition to useful analytical and theoretical frameworks, this literature offers social work a rich environmental vocabulary. Three concepts—place, space, and spatiality—warrant explication here. All are complex terms, with contested meanings across disciplines and theorists.

Place, as architect and public historian Hayden (1995, p. 15) pointed out, "is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid." Most commonly, it denotes a physical location to which there is some emotional attachment—a "space given meaning by human feelings" (Women and Geography, 1997, p. 8). In her evocative book, *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard (1998, p. 7) described place as "latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there." Although contemporary experience is inherently fluid and different people may have different experiences of the same place, this view of place as a location to which one has some attachment or connection is the one relied on in this article.

The term *space* describes objects in relation to each other in physical space, without implying personal or emotional connection to a particular place. In contemporary theory, absolute understandings of space—as a fixed, objective, external world—have been overtaken by conceptualizations of space as both expressive of and constituted by social and economic relationships and thus as inherently dynamic, evolving, and socially constructed. For example, the physical environment, both

natural and built, is always shaped by human interventions and perceptions; it cannot be understood outside these social relationships. The term *spatiality* is now widely used to convey this critical understanding of space as socially produced and interpreted (Soja, 1985).

A "critical spatial perspective" (Soja, 1989) opens up a view of the environment as an active social process, rather than just a fixed backdrop for human relationships. It follows, then, that environments both *reflect* and *construct* power relations and that they do so at multiple levels, ranging from individual subjectivity (for instance, socialized beliefs about appropriate behavior for girls) to larger social arrangements (such as residential and labor market segregation). Many social work settings illustrate the connection between environments and systems of social power. School buildings and playgrounds, for example, are typically designed as much to control children's behavior as to provide environments for learning. Similarly, the nature and layout of agency waiting rooms may reinforce social hierarchies and conventional models of client-professional relationships.

The understanding that environments are deeply implicated in larger sociostructural arrangements leads, in turn, to the realization that "the" environment is actually multiple, coexisting environments. Both social location and social identity—the complex mix of factors, such as gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, or age that together make up one's personal and cultural identity—deeply influence one's experience in a particular environment (Massey, 1994). Laneta, the young woman described earlier, will experience her new work environment in a suburban bank differently from colleagues who were raised in suburbia. And if these colleagues were to visit Laneta's home community (an unlikely event, given existing patterns of spatial and residential segregation), they would be likely to have a different view of it than she does.

This article proposes an integrated approach to women in their environmental contexts that encompasses the physical and social environment (the observable world), the experienced environment (the environment as the person perceives, lives, and interprets it), and the environment as a medium of social

power. The following sections focus on the last two dimensions, which have been least articulated for social work practice.

THEORIZING WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTS

Women's Experiences in Everyday Environments

When people think of women's environments, intimate, familiar, and everyday places come most readily to mind. For many women (as for many men), the places of their lives—the environments, as Lippard (1998) put it, that women know "from the inside"—lie at the center of their sense of belonging and identity. They are sites of memory and history; of nurturance, connection, and restoration; of the freedom to be most truly themselves (Young, 1997). Yet this tendency to associate women with home and community reflects long-standing social ideas about women's roles and place in society (McDowell, 1999). Feminist historians (Nicholson, 1986; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985) have richly documented the progressive relegation of middle-class Western women to the "separate sphere" of home and family that took place in the late 19th century, along with the rise of capitalism. Despite women's many subsequent inroads into the public sphere (and the fact that women have always worked and found ways to participate in the public domain), this gendered ideology continues to shape women's everyday lives, as well as social expectations about women's experiences and behavior.

The tendency to associate women with private and domestic spaces is thus fraught with contradictions. On one hand, it connects women to experiences that are intensely meaningful and that for many women are primary sources of identity and power. On the other hand, it locates women in a domain that is socially constructed as both separate from and secondary to the "masculine" world of work and public life. A feminized ideology of domesticity, in which home and work are constructed as oppositions, obscures the reality that many women's lives have consistently been at odds with dominant understandings of the

privacy and separateness of home from "work." Furthermore, idealized associations of women with domestic environments overlook the many women who are displaced or homeless, who have lost not only physical shelter, but their emotional connections to a particular home or "place" (Ang-Lygate, 1996). They also obscure the fact that for many women, home is primarily a site of abuse, violence, or oppression.

To complicate matters further, women's "homeplaces" (hooks, 1990) have historically been essential sites of resistance and connection for women of color in the face of oppression. In their homes and in community settings, hooks (1990, p. 42) pointed out, African American women created "spaces of care and nurturance" that were outside the reach of racist society— spaces where black women "could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation." African American women's *conscious* commitment to racial uplift and liberation is a "revisioning of the idea of home" (hooks, 1990, p. 35) that challenges conventional views of women's homemaking as "simply" an extension of women's proper place and positions women's home and community activities as a vibrant component of public and political life and social change.

The challenge is thus to find out what home and place mean in women's lives without being unduly romantic or negating women's experiences in domestic settings (Young, 1990). Eliciting this information involves carefully listening to and exploring women's perspectives on their particular environmental experiences, including how these experiences have been shaped by such factors as age, culture, or class. In a study of residents in abandoned housing in New York City, Leavitt and Saegert (1990) found that many of the older women they interviewed chose to remain in their dilapidated buildings, rather than to relocate to suburban homes where they feared they would be socially isolated. They reported one woman's response when her son took her to look for a house on suburban Long Island: "I said to myself, why am I coming all the way out here? I don't know anyone in the neighborhood. I'll be completely isolated. I don't drive. So I said no" (p. 185).

Women's experiences in environments beyond the home are similarly complex, for reasons that are also related to women's gendered identities, particularly their roles as mothers and caretakers. Gilbert (1997), a geographer, noted for example, that "women's survival strategies and the spatial boundedness of their everyday lives are mutually constituted" (p. 35). For instance, women's choices of employment tend to be more localized and thus more restricted than those of men, constraints that reflect complex interconnections among the various domains of women's work, including paid employment, child care, and other domestic responsibilities (Hanson & Pratt, 1995). These experiences of work and caregiving are complicated or simplified by spatial factors, such as the distance between home and the workplace, location of child care, access to transportation, and availability of other environmental supports and resources (Katz & Monk, 1993; Korbin & Coulton, 1997). Gilbert's (1998) research on the survival strategies of African American and White low-income women revealed that many women choose where to live on the basis of access to family and friends and then look for jobs that will allow them to use these place-based social networks for support and help with child care and other needs. Such strategies are further shaped by race and ethnicity. Gilbert found that African American women relied more exclusively than did White women on local personal contacts to obtain employment and child care, with resulting constrictions in the geography of their daily lives (see Figure 1).

The connections between women and their place-based networks are complex and multidimensional. Dyck (1996) demonstrated that women show considerable initiative and collectivity in negotiating child care options and supporting each other and argued that these arrangements provide rich evidence of women's agency in response to the demands of their everyday environments. Gilbert (1998) confirmed these benefits, but noted that the same networks may tie women to low-paying jobs in female-dominated occupations, to communities with relatively limited resources, or to burdensome connections
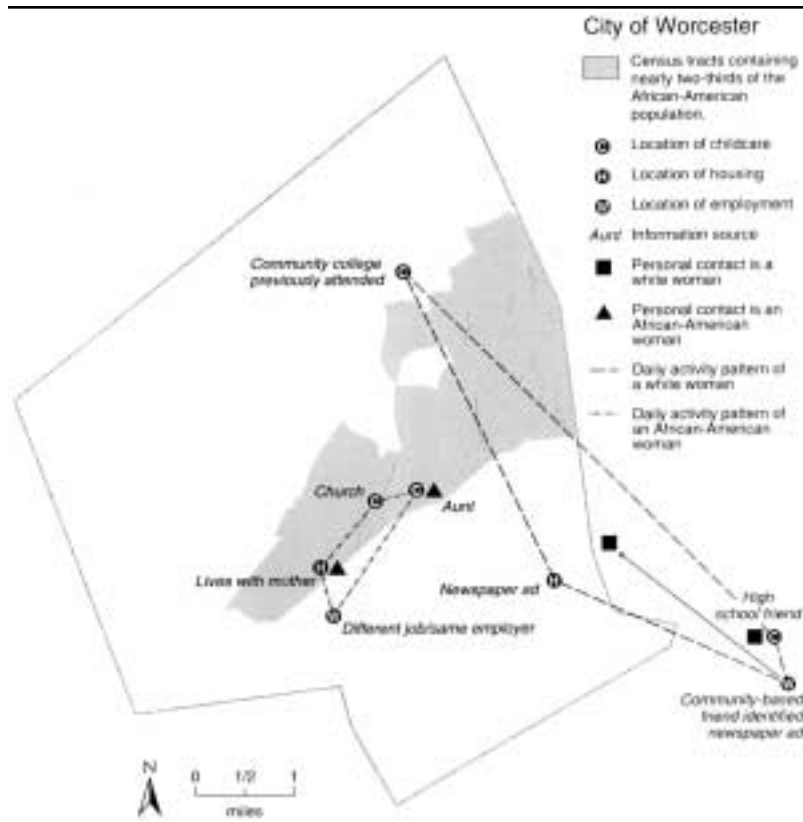
FIGURE 1.   Mapping Women's Environments
SOURCE: Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Blackwell Publishers, from M. R. Gilbert (1998).

with family and friends. Other researchers have similarly detailed the complex nature of women's spatial attachments, particularly for women of color who live in high-stress neighborhoods with limited access to jobs and other resources and whose social networks may already be overburdened (Brodsky, 1996; Korbin & Coulton, 1997).

An essential first step in a women-centered approach to environmental assessment and intervention is thus careful attention to the content, texture, and meaning of women's environmental experiences. In feminist theory (Bannerji, 1995; Smith, 1987),

lived experience is valued on its own terms, but is also seen as a "fulcrum" or hinge that provides access to other, larger understandings of one's place in the world. The "ordinary and the unexceptional" details of women's everyday lives (Rose, 1993, p. 23) contain a wealth of information about the connections between environmental factors and other life domains. Furthermore, beginning with women's accounts of their environmental experiences validates women as "capable knowers" (Korin, 1994) who have expertise and agency in their own lives. Such conversations also provide the opportunity to engage women, singly or collectively, in the potentially transformative process of "theorizing" the connections between these experiences and larger social arrangements. To do so, however, social workers need to be deeply attentive to the complexity of women's experiences in both public and private environments, including the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to produce different relationships to the external world.

Women's Environments as Sociopolitical Contexts

Women's experiences in everyday environments cannot adequately be understood without consideration of the ways in which environments actively construct women's identities, opportunities, and social relationships. In the physical environment, for example, structures and arrangements both express and constitute gender differences and other social relationships (Ruddick, 1996; Spain, 1992). Writing about women's experiences in cities, Darke (1996, p. 88) stated that "assumptions about roles and the proper places for different categories of people are literally built into towns and cities, whether these categories are gender, age groups, castes, classes, or ethnic groups. Our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass, and concrete." Women architects, designers, and urban planners have mapped out the many ways in which built environments, both public and private, function as "blueprints for inequality" (Seager, 1993) with powerful impacts on women's lives. In domains as varied as the design of housing and offices, the structure of mortgage financing, or the assumptions built

into the layouts of public spaces, such as airports and urban streetscapes, environments have been shown to reflect both conventional gender expectations and a lack of awareness of women's needs and rights as citizens who share public spaces (see, for examples, Matrix, 1984; Spain, 1992; Weisman, 1992). Chasteen (1994) documented the struggles that women without partners experience—from negotiating the assumptions about household income built into the housing market to the structure of leisure activities—in a world that is spatially organized to meet the needs of couples and families. Lesbian women face similar challenges when they seek to establish homes and families in communities that are defined by heterosexual norms (Valentine, 1995).

Social beliefs about "appropriate" spatial behavior for women likewise both reflect and perpetuate gendered understandings of women and their place in the material world. Despite women's many advances, the impulse to regulate women's use of public spaces persists, with implications for how women experience both domestic and public environments. Take, for example, the issue of safety. Research suggests that women's socialized sense of themselves as spatial beings strongly influences their beliefs about which environments are safe and which are not and their decisions about where to go, with whom, and at what times (Valentine, 1989). Despite evidence to the contrary, women generally believe they are safer in their homes than in public places (Gardner, 1990)—a belief that is reinforced by social attitudes that women bear some responsibility for what happens to them if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Women's internalized understandings of self-in-environment thus interact with external constraints to regulate women's use of both public and private spaces.

Many everyday environments are oppressive to women. Yet, as Matrix (1984, p. 12) pointed out, "the form of this oppression changes through time and with place, and the individual woman's experience of it varies according to factors such as class, race, personality and sexual preference." In relation to women's fear of violence, Day (1999) found that race (specifically racism) interacts with features of the physical environment

to shape women's experiences of fear or comfort. In Day's study, women of color described fear that was based on their racial identity as well as on being women, whereas White women described fear primarily on the grounds of their gender. For both groups of women, geography, particularly residential segregation, strongly interacted with gender and race to mediate the extent to which they feared public spaces. Hence, women of color, who had to cross racial lines to go to work, expressed more concern about racial and sexual harassment than did White women, whose work and home experiences were in predominantly White neighborhoods.

In considering the implications of women's environmental experiences, one should not overlook Massey's (1994) important point that constraints on women as environmental actors translate into restrictions on women's social, economic, and political participation. Accurate understandings of women's environmental realities are thus deeply relevant to social work practice that aspires to promote social justice.

Women as Active Participants in Their Environments

At the same time, not all women's experiences in public and urban environments are toxic or disempowering. Wilson (1991) contended that urban life, in its diversity and anonymity, offers women opportunities for "pleasure, deviance, [and] disruption" that are not readily available elsewhere. Even in urban environments that are defined as masculine or dangerous, she pointed out, women have always found ways to make space for themselves. In the Charity Organization Societies and settlement houses, for example, early social workers carved out a significant public role for women at a time when the prevailing social ideology strongly reinforced the relegation of middle-class women to the private sphere of home and family (Gleeson, 1995; Walkowitz, 1992). Through the strategic use of the rhetoric of motherhood, these women stretched the boundaries of domesticity to include the "public mothering" of social reform and community-based social service (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985).

Contemporary women likewise continue to resist and reshape gendered expectations and constraints. In even the most marginalized communities, women raise families, get by, form relationships, and manage scarce resources (Brodsky, 1996; Leavitt & Saegert, 1990; Stack, 1974). In one of Chicago's bleakest public housing projects, for example, women transformed their environment by working together to develop a range of community resources, including a youth program and a flourishing community laundry in an unused basement and, in the process, were empowered as individuals and as a community (Feldman & Stall, 1994). In her research on women and violence, Koskela (1997) interviewed women who described themselves as confident or in control in public spaces typically defined as unsafe for women. These women used a range of active coping strategies, including demystifying such environments by using them routinely, employing skills in managing interactions and interpreting signs of danger, and believing that they had a right to participate in a particular place and feel at home in it. Koskela concluded that "[w]omen are not merely objects in space where they experience restrictions and obligations; they also actively produce, define, and reclaim space" (p. 305).

These and other studies in the feminist literature on women and environments have underscored women's strengths and capacities as spatial actors. To overlook these strengths and focus only on the limitations and dangers that women face, Wilson (1991) argued, may be (unwittingly) to replicate paternalistic views of women as potential victims in need of male protection. Therefore, what is most useful is a dialectical stance that encompasses both the real challenges that women confront in everyday environments *and* the possibilities that are open to them even in difficult environmental circumstances. From this perspective, environments can be understood as fluid containers for women's lives, rather than as fixed and largely unchanging. As the Personal Narratives Group (1989, p. 19) stated: "Context is not a script. Rather it is a dynamic process through which the individual simultaneously shapes and is shaped by her environment." Environments and the women who inhabit them are thus open to transformation.

WOMEN-IN-ENVIRONMENT
AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

> Specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with in making an account of anybody's life. (Steedman, 1986, p. 6)

The material presented in this article highlights the central importance of understanding the rhythm and content of women's time-space experiences and the ways in which these experiences shape opportunities for autonomy and participation. Three interlocking domains are particularly salient: (a) women's subjective experiences in their everyday environments; (b) the connections between and among women's environmental experiences, the geography of women's lives, and larger social categories, such as race-ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation; and (c) women's environmental strengths, resources, and agency. Social workers need skillful ways to enter these dimensions of the social and spatial ecology of practice. Relevant tools for such inquiry include a mix of narrative methods, Freirian critical reflection (Freire, 1973), and assessment strategies that provide structured opportunities to explore women's environmental experiences.

Narratives and Critical Reflection

Women's accounts of their environmental experiences provide the inner structure for women-environment assessments. Narratives of everyday life are invariably rich in environmental content. These stories also contain vital information on the ways in which personal and cultural beliefs and values interact with the external world to produce the *experienced environment*—an environment that has particular meaning for a client and her reference group. Even when social workers have direct knowledge of their clients' home and neighborhood circumstances, this knowledge should complement, rather than substitute for, women's own environmental perceptions. Systematic efforts to listen for, draw out, and explore women's stories are thus essen-

tial to knowing the environmental context *as the client understands and explains it*.

Gaining access to such information requires the use of narrative methods that are deliberately attentive to the contexts in which personal experience is embedded. A useful example is Leigh's (1998) work on ethnographic interviewing, in which open-ended questions (such as, "Would you tell me about the living conditions of people in your neighborhood?" or "I'm interested in how people in your neighborhood help each other") are used to explore key life domains, including environmental and spatial experiences. Such questions broaden the focus of assessment beyond the person and affirm the client as a cultural guide who is both knowledgeable about her social and environmental experiences and able to teach others about them.

Social workers can expand these descriptive accounts to incorporate critical analyses by giving women opportunities not only to narrate their environmental experiences, but to make connections between these and larger social conditions. Support for such an approach is readily found in the literature on empowerment, which suggests that the ability to externalize and contextualize personal experience is central to the ability to act differently in the external environment (Gutierrez, 1996). Strategies for developing such perspectives also build on the work of Freire (1973), who emphasized the use of "problem-posing" and critically reflective dialogue as a basis for exploring the relationships between everyday lived experiences and social and political arrangements. Central to this process is deliberate attention to questions of power and agency, including (as was mentioned earlier) both the constraints that women experience in their everyday environments and the multiple and creative ways in which women resist or negotiate them. For example, in her clinical practice using a Freirian model, Korin (1994, p. 90) used systematic and specific questions to "reveal the complexities of my clients' lives" and to make connections between immediate personal experience and the contexts in which this experience is embedded.

Practical Strategies for
Women-in-Environment Assessments

Assessment tools that incorporate expressive modalities, such as writing or drawing, and that bring particular aspects of the environment to the center of attention add dimensionality and specificity to the primarily verbal techniques just described. Leigh (1998) asked clients to draw pictures of their neighborhood or of a room in a typical house in their community. Eco-mapping (Hartman, 1978) and social network mapping (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990) are also valuable sources of contextual information. Such methods do not, however, fully capture the complex interrelationships among the different spatial domains in women's lives, such as home, work, and community institutions. Nor do they focus on the ways in which different axes of women's experience, such as gender, race, and class, come together in women's environments to construct identities and opportunities.

Getting to the heart of these relationships requires new questions and new tools, useful models for which can be found in other disciplines. In geography, for example, researchers literally map people's daily activities in relation to their everyday environments. The map in Figure 1, for instance, contrasts the lived geographies of two low-income women, one White and one African American (Gilbert, 1998). It vividly conveys information about the *nature* of women's networks (their personal contacts and sources of information), the *location* of daily activities and network members, and the *patterns* women make as they go about their lives. In this graphic format, multiple dimensions of women's spatial experience can be readily scrutinized and compared.

Such straightforward tools can be easily adapted for use in practice. With basic materials, such as a map, a calendar, and a large piece of paper, Laneta (the young woman described earlier) and her social worker could construct a picture of her various commitments—home, work, volunteering, child care, family, and friends—in relation to one another in space and time.

Simple but specific questions guide this process of environmental analysis:

1. How long has she lived in this community? What is her experience of it?
2. Where are the primary environments in her life located: her home, child care setting, place of employment, church, the homes of extended family members and friends, or other key places and activities?
3. Where and how does she spend her time? On a typical weekday? On the weekend?
4. What form of transportation does she use? How convenient and reliable is it? How much time does it take to get from place to place?
5. What supports, natural or formal, can she and her family rely on? Where are these supports located?
6. How do other domains of her experience (such as age, race-ethnicity, ability-disability, and sexual orientation) affect her daily environmental routines, access to resources and opportunities, and levels of environmental stress or sustenance?
7. What challenges and pleasures does she experience in her everyday environments? How safe does she feel in her home and neighborhood and in other daily environments?
8. What strategies does she use to screen, interpret, and manage her environments?

CONCLUSION

A gendered lens brings into sharper focus the salience of the environment in women's lives as a core domain of experience and a critical factor in women's empowerment. Much work remains to be done, however, to elaborate both the conceptual underpinnings of the critical ecological perspective presented here and the methods for bringing such a perspective to life in the daily encounters of social work practitioners. Research is also needed to determine how best to bring insights from the increasingly fine-grained interdisciplinary (but largely non-applied) literature on women's environmental experiences

to bear on the applied work of designing and testing interventions.

Current practice realities, particularly the constraints of managed care and related emphases on short-term, agency-based, and psychologically oriented services, also pose challenges for social workers who want to incorporate a women-centered and critically reflective approach to the environment into their practice. Ecologically valid knowledge on women-in-environments is most readily gained in community- and home-based services—models that despite their widespread promotion (Schorr, 1997) continue to be underfunded and undervalued.

Therefore, the challenge presented here is only partly a question of improved practice methods. Social workers must also ponder their investment in methods and theories that push the environmental contexts of everyday life far into the background of the process of help, including the lack of gendered analyses in a profession that is overwhelmingly composed of and accountable to women. Social workers, too, must develop richer and more contextualized cognitive maps, informed by theories and research from other disciplines, as well as by the detailed environmental knowing of clients and their communities.

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