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Psychologists and the problem of population growth

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REPLY

Psychologists and the Problem of Population Growth: Reply to Bridgeman (2017)

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Bridgeman (2017) describes the important role of population growth in contributing to environmental problems. The present essay argues that population is an important component of human impact on the environment, but it must be considered in combination with consumption rates. A place-based approach, examining the local context for reproductive decisions, is necessary to assess population growth as a contributor to environmental impact and to develop appropriate behavioral interventions.

Keywords: consumption, environment, place-based approach, population, sustainability

Bridgeman (2017) noted that population growth is a significant part of human contributions to environmental problems. Indeed, *Clayton et al. (2016)* stated that “rapid growth in population and consumption means that more territory is developed for human habitation and production, more natural resources are being consumed, and more dangerous byproducts of production are released into ecosystems” (p. 200).

As argued earlier (*Clayton et al., 2016*), interventions to promote sustainability must consider the environmental impact of the targeted behaviors. The impact of population growth depends not just on the number of people but also on what people do, so decreasing population rates may not

translate into lower environmental impact. Some calculations indicate that changes in affluence, by increasing consumption, have a greater impact on environmental stress than do changes in population (*Stern, Sovacool, & Dietz, 2016*). Furthermore, over the last 10 years, the emission of heat-trapping gases in the United States has decreased (<http://www.eia.gov/environment/emissions/carbon/>), although the population continues to rise. Thus, it is important to consider population growth in combination with consumption level.

The plasticity of a behavior is also important in identifying targets for interventions. Variability in the rate of population increase suggests that it is susceptible to a range of influences. In 2015, for example, the rate of increase was below 0 in many countries but over 10% in Kuwait (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW>). It also varies across generations and demographic groups within countries (*Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2010*). Population growth is determined by both social and psychological influences that vary cross-culturally. Enhancing educational attainment for women, access to birth control, and the viability of alternatives to having children would all reduce the rate of increase (cf. *Samir & Lutz, 2017*). Local social norms have also been successfully used in media campaigns to encourage greater contraception use (*Bandura, 2002*). A behavioral analysis of

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population growth points to the importance of adopting a contextualized, place-based approach (Clayton et al., 2016).

Cultural variability may also create differences in reactions to policies. Human rights violations have been committed under the umbrella of population control measures: Forced sterilization programs and coercive policies have decreased rather than increased the choices available to women, fostering suspicion and distrust (Hartmann, 1995). Family planning efforts that are sensitive to the social and historical context in which reproduction decisions are made can more effectively help control the timing and number of pregnancies (Upadhyay et al., 2014). Focusing on the conditions that influence reproduction is preferable to emphasizing population limits. Also, it is important to include non-Western contexts, where comparatively little psychological research has taken place, when studying attitudes toward policies that target population growth.

The contributions of population growth are often overlooked by environmental psychologists, among others (but see Swim, Clayton, & Howard, 2011). The environmental crises that confront society require everyone to consider the environmental implications of reproductive options and decisions, as well as of their research agendas. Population must be part of the discussion for psychologists and policymakers alike.

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