

Lunar and Other Cycles as Steps Toward Human Ecology

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KEY WORDS Cycles. Lunar. Human Ecology. Research.

ABSTRACT Lunar cycles may well influence the social patterns in communities, but far more important activities are also taking place, including wars, violence, ecological destruction, and economic disparity. Social scientists, researchers, and clinicians can and should consider the larger picture in today's world, rather than research activities on sometimes esoteric topics.

Do you want to change the world? Are you interested in making a positive difference in helping people and their environment? Like most people intrigued with human ecology, I began my career with those and related interests. Along the way, I found that intent is not sufficient - I found that you must become aware of your own values, discover your perceptions and understandings of the ways the world works, figure out your own perceptions of the ways you would like the world to work, then learn to design strategies to create positive change and finally, acquire the ability to aim very carefully. This brief account is a story of one small research endeavour that may interest those seeking a deeper understanding of human ecology.

Fresh from graduate school with a doctorate in rehabilitation and an abiding interest and a large number of courses in anthropology, I settled into a research position in a mental health centre in a Southern community in the United States. Located near a large military base, I protested the Viet Nam War by marching in protests in Washington, D. C. on the weekends, then joined in all the activities of a comprehensive community based mental health centre each week. This included assessment and treatment of families of military people, many of whom were serving in Viet Nam. I empathized with the children and teenagers especially, for they were caught up in a chaotic homelife.

The centre staff, from my point of view

somewhat biased about the politics of the war, remarked frequently that the full moon caused the incidence of new admissions to the Centre to soar, and that clients were particularly stressed in accord with the lunar cycle. Of course, I felt that the Viet Nam War generated plenty of stress and that the lunar cycle was if anything, simply irrelevant.

With a small community at hand though, my research instincts were effectively aided by these concerns of the staff. It was a simple matter to collect data, another quick analysis to fit in the findings with the lunar cycle, and still another easy feat to conceptualize a framework for understanding exactly what was going on. Or so I thought at the time. After all, the graduate school mentality, the quick fix pattern of psychological research, and the non-political nature of such procedures would be a matter of course.

In practice, the research project was less successful but the teaching and learning I gained from the exercise remain strong, some thirty years later. My reflections are many, and I share them with the hope that others may take up the interesting challenges facing us in the near future.

I began my research project on the correlation of the lunar cycle with the admission pattern to the Mental Health Centre by compiling the 1968 admission statistics. Admissions were far more frequent on Mondays with fewest on Wednesdays. The total numbers were insufficient to prove or disprove rises and falls in line with the monthly lunar cycle however. I reasoned that since weekends were obviously stressful, Monday morning admissions would have to be high, as the centre was closed after 5 PM Friday until Monday morning at 8 AM. Easy enough. To me, the implications were that the centre, and indeed, all social agencies, should be open on Saturday and Sunday, and closed or reduced on

Wednesday and Thursday. The staff and people in other health, social, and welfare agencies, however, did not appreciate those suggestions.

Conceptually, the ideas that took my imagination were those of the anthropologists who, in looking at Native Americans, particularly those with agriculture based on spring planting and autumn harvests, noted other types of cycles. The intense investment of time, effort, energy, resources and so on in the spring was often accompanied by purification rituals, festivals for planting and so on. Social tensions that had built up over the winter could be reduced or lessened with social events and festivals, just as autumn harvests were greeted with happy celebrations after work was finally over following the growing season. Before the burden of winter, there was ample time to celebrate the harvest, to enjoy time granted to people by their freedom from work in the fields, and to make the necessary preparations for winter.

In reading about such ceremonies from anthropological studies from all around the world, I noted that very frequently a mid-winter and a mid summer festival were held. Interspersed between these four major holidays were several and often around eight minor holidays - such that there were two minor celebrations after each major one. This accorded beautifully with the major holidays we celebrated ourselves: Christmas, New Years, Easter, 4th of July, and Labor Day or Thanksgiving. Not only that, but minor holidays were interspersed in the American annual cycle, perhaps not regularly but at varying times through the year. I felt I was on the right track. Plus, I noted, twelve holidays coincided neatly with the lunar cycle.

"Fascinating, too," I thought to myself, "how Marx would have enjoyed such patterns, for the economy, planting and harvesting, drives the social life of the community and nation." I did not agree with Marx or even neo-Marxian interpretations, but the potential connections were intriguing.

Obviously I needed more data, so my next steps were to gain access to local police records for 1968. These were public and therefore were secured relatively easily. Then I went to the hospital emergency room for their data as well. Although a few days records were unavailable, most

of the information was made available to me, and I recorded virtually everything available from these records. Running similar analyses as before led to remarkably productive charts, for the evidence was plain for the weekly cycles. Saturday night was the night of violence and accident, with Friday evening not far behind. Sunday was in third place, while Wednesdays were safer for all by far. The monthly cycles however were more tenuous, but demonstrated that at least a faint effect was present as well.

I charted the lunar cycle, cutting the lunar months into 4 parts and found that the full moon did indeed correlate weakly with the monthly effect. But the statistics were not clear enough to be really clear and significant in the way I would have liked. The data was sufficiently complex that simple analysis was insufficient.

Further, the conceptual framework was not so easy and not so simple. Seasonal effects were several, for prison and hospital institutions empty out, police arrests go up, and people are out and about more in summer, thus have more trips to emergency rooms. Teasing the data could have drawn out still more information, but I changed jobs about that time and the data have lain silently now for 30 years.

Further, in 1969, the US military changed their payment scheme so that the troops who had been paid once a month were now paid twice a month. The small effects from the lunar cycle, I would bet, were undoubtedly further dissipated. The small, perhaps spurious, perhaps real correlation that I found was, I fully believe, due not to the lunar cycle at all, but rather to the monthly payroll, a gigantic economic effect with tens of thousands of troops stationed only a few miles from my small Southern town almost entirely dependent upon military largesse.

Virtually any monthly cycle would correlate either directly or more likely indirectly with the effects of a once a month payday, given the massive scale of the military economy. Thus I concluded that the lunar cycle does and did correlate with monthly admission and arrest cycles, and of that I am sure. But the more significant finding for me was that clinicians and others unintentionally ignore the most obvious causes and effects of war, that is, the industrial and business and social and political powers that be and their

cycles, and yet they search out, look for, and study individuals, individual pathology, and esoteric relationships - such as lunar cycles. I must admit, I too, was sucked into research on such trivia.

Why, I ask myself, and others now, don't we do something about the obvious and clear social and economic and political problems of our time - hunger, poverty, homelessness, alcoholism, drug abuse, income gaps such that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, political corruption, pollution, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, soil loss, global warming, and so on? We have very limited time, energy, and resources.

My challenge to myself and to you, is to address those major issues that matter, and those issues about which we must, and can, act. At the same time, we all need to become more aware of the esoteric, the diversions, the illusions about which we can do little, and which, though intriguing, waste our precious time and energy. Thus in a sometimes round about way, one cycles through life but only slowly gains insight into the nature and substance of this discipline, this field of study called human ecology, the relationships of people within their environment. And even more slowly, we learn to focus on the important, the issues that matter.