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Journal of Environmental Psychology 25 (2005) 23–35

Journal of ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Cultural theory meets the community: Worldviews and local issues

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Available online 17 March 2005

Abstract

This paper constitutes an attempt to clarify the relationship between "environmental hyperopia" (the discrepancy between environmental concern towards global and local targets) and cultural worldviews regarding nature. A 14-item scale was developed to assess the four views of nature identified by cultural theory. The results, obtained in a sample of 300 residents of an industrialized area, support the relationships predicted by the theory. Altogether, the results on environmental concern showed the "environmental hyperopia" effect: concern for local environmental issues was more attenuated than for global ones, risk perception of local sources of pollution was perceived as lower than distant threats, and global sources of information about the environment were considered more trustworthy than local ones. However, all these effects were influenced by the views people hold on nature. In particular, egalitarians were the ones who exacerbated these effects, and individualistic participants were the ones who were more immune to them. This last result indicates that individualistic residents may have the potential to be involved in local environmental issues. Egalitarian individuals also proved to be particularly responsive to the dimensions of social integration and belongingness to place attachment, and this can be the reason for their low sensitivity to local problems.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, the definition of sustainable development brought particular saliency to global environmental issues in the public arena. Besides calling our attention to the global problems of the planet and to the interdependency of the economic and environmental goals, Agenda 21 defined participative action at a local level as a desirable path to our common future. However, research has shown that although levels of self-reported environmental concern are, on the whole, very high (e.g. Dunlap, Gallup, & Gallup, 1993), there is a general tendency for the general public to present higher levels of concern for global issues as compared to local ones, an effect also known as "environmental hyperopia" (Uzzell, 2000). Nevertheless, not even this trend is totally stable, since it is also sometimes reversed (see Gooch, 1995). On the whole, this means that the interplay between local and global environmental concerns is not yet fully understood, and that there is a need for more detailed research on the local/global dichotomy (Uzzell, 2000). This paper focuses on these two levels. Following what in the last few years has been a rather central convergent concern of several traditions of study of environmental thought—the examination of how broader belief systems organize views of nature and the environment—the present paper attempts to show how this dichotomy maintains complex relations with these systems. In addition, it also seeks to further develop our understanding of the links between these systems and the sense of community and local identity.

1.1. The cultural approach to environmental thought

During the last 20 years, cultural theory has been gaining influence in the study of environmental thought, from a point of view that considers how broader belief systems organize views of nature and the environment. Developed by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982; Douglas, 1985), cultural theory's main tenet is

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doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2004.11.004

that our society, like any other, uses cultural lenses—or cultural filters, or worldviews—to look at all types of phenomena, nature and the environment included, positing that there can be no culturally unmediated perception. These worldviews are a result of peoples' socialization and participation in the four main forms of current social organization. These forms, in turn, can be characterized through two dimensions—the Group and the Grid dimensions.

The first dimension, or axis,—Group—has to do with the "outside boundary that people have erected between themselves and the outside world" (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 138). That is, this dimension refers to the fact that there are forms of social organisation that allow for permeability between the inside and the outside, whereas there are others that accentuate the difference between the We and the Them, or the inside and the outside, rather strongly. The second dimension—Grid—applies to the constraints that individuals find within the organizations they belong to. These constraints can be rather strict, severely limiting the range of approved behaviours, or alternatively, they can offer individuals considerable space for manoeuvre.

By crossing the two dimensions, cultural theory identifies four rationalities, or ways of looking at the world, each corresponding to a quadrant: egalitarianism (High Group-Low Grid); individualism (Low Group-Low Grid); hierarchy or bureaucracy (High Group-High Grid), and fatalism (Low Group-High Grid). Each of these rationalities, sometimes also called cultural biases, is "a point of view, with its own framing assumptions and readily available solutions for standardized problems" (Douglas, 1997, p. 128, cit. in Ellis & Thompson, 1997). What the theory calls the *Center*—sometimes also the Establishment—aggregates hierarchicals and individualists, and the *Border* includes egalitarians and fatalists.

It is the Border, not the Center, *that fears for nature* (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). In the 1982 book, a lively description of the activities of the initial American environmental groups, such as the Audubon Society or the Sierra Club, is presented to illustrate the egalitarian worldview—alarmed, dichotomized, sectarian, expecting imminent ecological disaster in a nature whose balance has been disrupted. This is a worldview which is suspicious of technological solutions for environmental problems, and which relies on egalitarian arrangements for decision-making. For these reasons, the guiding management rule for this rationality is the precautionary principle.

By contrast, the *Center* is not really alarmed, considering other risks besides the environmental ones to be more pressing. Individualists are particularly concerned with the lack of freedom to continue business as usual, and believe that carrying on through the same paths pursued thus far is the answer. Most researchers in the area call this rationality "market individualism", for its reliance on market to solve problems. Within the same logic, the preferred risk management style is pragmatic, noninterventionist, almost laissez-faire. Although fearing social disruption most of all, hierarchical individuals trust rules and regulations, and believe institutional order and experts will be able to take care of all types of problems. In this case, then, there is a clear difference between hierarchical and individualistic risk management styles, the former valuing an interventionist and regulatory approach, based on institutional advises of experts.

The 90s inaugurated a tendency for testing and operationalizing these ideas. This has been done through the development of scales and, sometimes, also single questions. These instruments are applied at the level of the individual, with the assumption that the four rationalities are lenses that organize the encounter of individuals with the world, producing different worldviews, or cultures. Dake, 1992; Wildavsky and Dake, 1990/1998, based on the ideas proposed by others (Schwarz & Thompson) developed and instrument to link each rationality with a particular view of nature, or, in his terminology, a particular Myth of nature. According to Dake (1992), Hierarchical persons would see nature as *robust*, but only up to a certain point, and where to draw the line is a task for experts. Egalitarians, in turn, would see nature as *fragile* and would, thus, undertake to fight for environmental protection. For individualists, nature is *benign*, amply capable of recovering from humanity's impact. It is also a source of abundance for all. Finally, fatalists—those who see life as a lottery—would see nature as being *capricious*, basically unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Marris, Langford, and O'Riordan (1996, 1998) lent some support to Dake's proposals, showing for instance that the myth of nature benign has positive correlations with a scale assessing individualism and negative correlations with a scale measuring egalitarianism. Further, they showed that the myth of nature fragile correlates positively with egalitarianism, and in general they showed the predicted relations between worldviews and preferences for the management of environmental problems. The correlations were not very strong, however. The work of Ellis and Thompson (1997) also seemed to point in the same direction, by finding positive relations between egalitarianism and environmentalism and, at the same time, a strong negative relation between individualism and environmentalism. Furthermore, the authors also showed that there were significant differences between a sample of the general public and a sample of environmental activists in regards to trust in science and technology, this being lower among activists. In the same vein, the results of Wildavsky and Dake (1990/1998) showed a strong correlation between egalitarianism and the perception