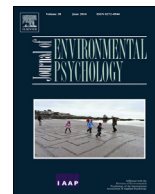


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## Journal of Environmental Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jep](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jep)

## The false consensus effect: A trigger of radicalization in locally unwanted land uses conflicts?

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 3 October 2014

Received in revised form

21 February 2015

Accepted 1 March 2015

Available online 4 March 2015

## Keywords:

NIMBY

LULU

Environmental conflict

False consensus

Protest

Mobilization

## ABSTRACT

We tackled conflicts over locally unwanted land use (LULU) focusing on the false consensus effect (FCE). Through a secondary analysis of data from a representative sample of residents in the district of Turin, Italy, where a high-speed railway (HSR) is to be sited ( $N = 1785$ ), we tested whether the FCE mediated the relationship between perceived threat to the location and mobilization against the HSR. Participants tended to overestimate the number of people holding their same opinion. Among opponents of the HSR ( $n = 305$ ), the tendency to be liable to the FCE was higher for those who perceived the project as a threat to the location. Moreover, the perception of an alleged consensus based on their own opinion mobilized them to defend their position. Our study suggests that standard approaches to LULU conflicts may benefit from the use of socio-cognitive variables. Strengths and limitations of the study are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, public opposition to the siting of new energy and transport infrastructures has been growing all over the world (Saint, Flavell, & Fox, 2009). In Italy, the number of conflicts concerning local unwanted land use (LULU) has systematically increased since 2005. In 2012, the NIMBY Forum Observatory ([www.nimbyforum.it](http://www.nimbyforum.it)) surveyed 354 conflicts, 151 more than in 2011. According to their data, in the majority of cases (62.7%) opposition was to power installations, such as hydroelectric and thermoelectric stations, power lines, biomass power plants, photovoltaic installations, and wind farms. Protests against waste disposal units (mainly landfills and incinerators) came to 28.3%, and against transport infrastructure to 7.6% of the cases surveyed.

Although LULU conflicts are not new or unusual in history, they are still some of the most complex issues to affect communities. The often-intractable nature of such conflicts, and the challenges they

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pose to decision-makers and communities have fueled animated political debates and stimulated a substantial amount of scientific research. According to early reviews, such as that by Kraft and Clary (1991), these kinds of protests are characterized by: "(1) distrust of project sponsors; (2) limited information about the siting issue; (3) attitudes toward the project that are local and parochial, and which do not consider broader ramifications; (4) an emotional orientation toward the conflict; and (5) a high level of concern about project risks" (pp. 302–303).

These characteristics led the first researchers into the subject to label the protests as Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) protests (e.g., Dear, 1992; Piller, 1991). The implicit assumptions underlying the NIMBY paradigm were apparently built on a set of values that prompted researchers to associate the alleged self-interest of local opponents with irrational conduct and selfish attitudes, while simultaneously overlooking the equally self-interested motives of proponents. Moreover, the early and conventional NIMBY view completely neglected the issues of democracy and power that were entailed by the conflicts revolving around unwanted land use, e.g., the related conflicting dynamics of top-down and bottom-up decision-making processes, and between authorities operating at different (local and national) territorial levels.

The NIMBY paradigm, which entails that groups opposing unwanted facilities are ill-informed, irrational, and/or selfish, has

been widely criticized. Evidence-based research has shown that LULU mobilizations are often rationally based (Takahashi & Gaber, 1998), that attitudes toward a facility do not depend on knowledge of its details (Dietz, Stern, & Rycroft, 1989), or on its distance from the mobilized area of residence (Martin & Myers, 2005), and that egoism is not among the main reasons for mobilization (Zald & McCarthy, 1987). Thus, empirical findings show that the concepts embedded in the NIMBY label are inappropriate for describing and explaining LULU conflicts (Burningham, Barnett, & Thrush, 2006; Wolsink, 2000, 2006).

Following criticism of the conventional NIMBY approach, the siting literature has identified a number of environmental, social, and psychological factors that have the potential to foster a negative response to unwanted facilities. These include: (a) the aesthetic impact of the facility itself, and relationships with outsiders (Haggett, 2011); (b) the type of facility, and the clarity of the choice available (Esaiasson, 2014); (c) values concerning environmental injustice and the fairness of the siting process (Wolsink & Devillee, 2009); (d) unwanted consequences, such as health and material concerns, and detrimental changes in quality of life (Schively, 2007); (e) perception of risks associated with the facility (Hunter & Leyden, 1995; Pol, Di Masso, Castrechini, Bonet, & Vidal, 2006; Wu, Zhai, Li, Ren, & Tsuchida, 2014); and (f) trust in the authorities, decision-makers, and development organizations (Groothuis & Miller, 2005; Gross, 2007). Most important for this study, alongside the studies that have addressed specific and discrete aspects of particular projects, a second strand of research has focused on two other environmental psychological issues.

First, with regard to the notions of place and psychological ties with places (i.e., place attachment, and place identity), LULU oppositions can be deemed as takers of place-protective actions that arise when projects threaten place-based identities and when their realization is likely to disrupt the emotional bonds that residents establish with the meaningful places in which they live or with whom they identify (Devine-Wright, 2009).

Place identity and place attachment are concepts built upon the assumption that the symbolic valence of the environment affects the way individuals conceive and describe themselves (Wester-Herber, 2004). Specifically, place identity denotes the psychological counterpart of the physical location in terms of meaning and emotions (Devine-Wright, 2009). Environmental research on a variety of territorial communities has demonstrated that a stable, meaningful, and valuable experience of a place of residence can contribute to fostering a positive individual sense of self (Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, & Foster-Fishman, 2006), but that individuals are not always totally aware of their emotional attachment to the place. However, they are likely to increase in awareness when an event forces them to leave the place (Fried, 2000) or threatens to disrupt their bond with it, as in the case of land uses that have a deep impact on the place itself. On this perspective, LULU oppositions are likely to emerge whenever a perceived negative change in the place of residence is likely to occur. Although there may be territorial communities characterized by weak place-attachment feelings, and weak or ambivalent, or even negative place identities, the extant siting literature reports on the importance of such dimensions in LULU conflicts.

Indeed, studies such as those by Vorkinn and Riese (2001), Devine-Wright and Howes (2010), and Devine-Wright (2013) have shown that, alongside project-related variables, high levels of place attachment and of perceived environmental injustice predict low acceptance of land-use changes. Jacquet and Stedman (2014) expanded this idea by suggesting that the anticipated risk or threat of disruption to place and community meanings and identities can prompt opposition. All of these studies emphasize the impact on public response to unwanted facilities of perceived

threat, either to residents' quality of life (Pol et al., 2006), to their personal wellbeing (Moser, 2009), or to their emotional bonds with places and place-based identities (Devine-Wright, 2009).

Second, a second strand of research has focused on the notion of environmental justice, arguing that residents legitimately demand to be treated fairly by a facility's proponents and the authorities, and to be significantly involved in all of the decisions in play (Bullard, 2000). The current study continues this line of research by examining the impact of perceived threat to places on the opposition to the siting of a high-speed railway (HSR) in the Susa Valley in Italy (for details of the facility, see below). Most importantly, our investigation introduces an additional and hitherto unexplored variable into the siting literature, namely the socio-cognitive bias labeled false consensus effect (FCE).

## 2. Socio-cognitive biases in conflicts over land use: the false consensus effect

All LULU oppositions give rise to social conflicts, or insert themselves into pre-existing ones. From a socio-psychological perspective, social conflicts can be analyzed through the lens of inter-group dynamics, which most social psychologists assume will develop from the basic process of social categorization. Decades of research have shown that social categorization processes affect the ways individuals and groups perceive others and shape their mutual relationships. Specifically, a social categorization process entails a tendency to positively evaluate the groups to which individuals belong (i.e., the ingroups) and to negatively evaluate external groups (i.e., the outgroups). This tendency, referred to as intergroup bias, has been acknowledged as a general phenomenon, but also one which is likely to be intensified by a number of factors, such as ingroup identification, ingroup and outgroup status, and threat (for a review, see Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

Among the numerous manifestations of intergroup bias, our study focuses on the false consensus effect. With the exception of two Italian studies that have explored the role of some socio-cognitive biases in LULU conflicts, namely Russo's (2009) on paranoid social cognition, and Roccato, Orazio, and Mannarini's (2015) on the ingroup overexclusion effect, at present the siting literature has never considered this type of variable in predicting public opposition to unwanted facilities.

The FCE has been defined as the tendency to overestimate the commonness of one's own views (opinions and preferences) and behaviors (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Such distortion has been explained on the basis of four main processes (see Marks & Miller, 1987; Verhaci, 2000). First, selective exposure and cognitive availability. Since people tend normally to relate to others who are similar to themselves, examples of agreement are more readily and frequently accessible from memory than examples of disagreement. This induces individuals to overestimate the degree of agreement with their own opinion. Second, salience and focus of attention. When individuals focus on their own preferred position, instead of considering one or more alternative positions, they are likely to presume inflated support for that position, as it is the most salient in the sphere of their immediate consciousness. Third, logical information processing. The FCE may be explained as the result of a causal attribution process, according to which individuals tend to explain their behaviors and opinions by attributing their causes to situational, as opposed to dispositional, forces. This tendency can be expected to result in perceived augmented consensus for the opinion or behavior in question. Fourth, and most important for this study, motivation. The motivational hypothesis refers to the tendency of individuals to use positioning of the self and others to validate the accuracy and correctness of their position, to strengthen perceived social support, and to maintain or

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