



Community perceptions of plantation forestry: The association between place meanings and social representations of a contentious rural land use

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ABSTRACT

A characteristic of land use disputes is the different ways a contentious land use is interpreted and represented by opposing groups. While there is evidence that land use conflict is partly explained by differences in place meanings, there is little understanding of how competing place meaning might explain different beliefs about a land use. In this study social representation theory and place theory provide a framework to examine the association between meanings attributed to the rural landscape and different beliefs about large scale plantation forestry. A mixed-method approach involving a visual-based Q-sorting task, word association task and qualitative analysis of interview questions was used to investigate shared place meanings attributed to the rural landscape and social representations of plantation forestry. Analysis of thirty-one semi-structured interviews conducted with rural and regional residents of north-west Tasmania, Australia, identified an association between shared place meanings and the way plantation forestry was represented: plantation forestry was more likely to be represented as posing an unacceptable risk by those attributing a range of lifestyle and amenity related meanings to the rural landscape, while participants attributing meanings more focused on production were likely to represent plantation forestry as both risk and benefit. These results support the contention that shared place meanings provide the context in which a controversial land use is socially interpreted in a way that conforms to the meanings of the group.

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1. Introduction

Rural land use conflict is characterised by a range of different meanings and beliefs (Greider & Garkovich, 1994). To anticipate and manage land use conflict it is necessary to understand processes shaping competing beliefs, particularly as expressed beliefs may not reflect more underlying concerns (von der Dunk, Gret-Regamey, Dalang, & Hersperger, 2011; van der Horst, 2007; Joffe, 2003). An association has been observed between the way a resource use is interpreted and conflicting symbolic meanings attributed to landscapes (Jacobs & Buijs, 2011; McLachlan, 2009; Woods, 2003). Jacobs and Buijs (2011) for example found stakeholder beliefs about the likely consequences of water management interventions to be related to different constructions of place meanings. However, the process by which conflicting beliefs about

a land use are shaped and constructed to align with symbolic place meanings is not clear. Place theory and social representation theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding divergent views about a resource use (Devine-Wright, 2009). Within this approach different versions of social or everyday knowledge about a resource use, defined as commonly shared networks of concepts, images and beliefs belonging to particular groups, are socially produced and reproduced within the course of everyday interaction and discourse (Moscovici, 2005, p.xii) as a means to protect shared place-related identity processes and attachments to place (Devine-Wright, 2009). This study contributes to an emerging literature within environmental psychology demonstrating the contested nature of socially constructed place meanings and contested social representations of the environment (Di Masso, Dixon, & Pol, 2011; Hubbard, 1996) by investigating the association between shared meanings attributed to the rural landscape and the multiple ways a controversial land use, plantation forestry, is socially represented in north-west Tasmania, Australia.

Although frequently promoted as offering a range of environmental, social and economic benefits (see for example Freedman, 2007; PVIC, 2002; Selby & Petajisto, 1995), social concern and

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conflict relating to commercial afforestation has been documented in almost all developed countries where a rapid expansion of plantation forestry has occurred (Schirmer, 2007). While there is now a significant body of literature relating to community perceptions of afforestation, much of this research focuses on identifying beliefs about the likely social, environmental and economic impacts of plantation forestry (for example Mercer & Underwood, 2002; Schirmer, 2000, 2002; Schirmer & Kanowski, 2001; Tonts, Campbell, & Black, 2001; Williams, Dunn, Ford, & Anderson, 2008; Williams, Nettle, & Petheram, 2003). Some of this research indicates the presence of conflicting beliefs about the likely outcomes of the expansion of plantation forestry (Elands & O'Leary, 2002; O'Leary, McCormack, & Clinch, 2000; Williams, 2009). However what is not evident from these studies is why there are different beliefs about likely outcomes, particularly when the perceived impacts of plantation forestry are not always supported through independent observation (Schirmer, 2009; Williams & Schirmer, 2012). Moreover, identification of individually held beliefs does not account for the social nature of attitude formation (Howarth, 2006a) or why beliefs are shared by individuals not obviously linked by socio-demographic characteristics (Benjamin, Bouchard, & Domon, 2007; Marcu, Uzzell, & Barnett, 2011; Williams, 2009).

While there is relatively little empirical research specifically investigating views about afforestation in relation to place theory, empirical studies suggest place related concepts such as place identity and place attachment are involved in some community response to afforestation (Selby & Petajisto, 2000). Selby and Petajisto (1995) for example found 'ties-to-place' to be a significant factor in farmers' and advisors' resistance to field afforestation in Finland, while in parts of Ireland Carroll, NíDhubháin, and Flint (2011) observed opposition arising in response to the scale and nature of afforestation conflicting with local identity and sense of place. Community opposition is likely to occur when plantation forestry is perceived to be out of place or does not fit with socially constructed meanings attributed to rural landscapes or ideas about rurality (Barlow & Cocklin, 2003; Kassioumis et al., 2004). While it is reasonable to assume public assessments of plantation forestry are formed within the context of local place meanings, the nature of the link between place meanings and perceptions of afforestation is unclear. Elands and O'Leary (2002) for example found attitudes towards afforestation varied significantly between countries, with less variation in attitudes observed within communities. Others have found public response to plantation forestry to differ between residents occupying similar spatial locations (Williams, 2011), between regions (O'Leary et al., 2000) and localities (Carroll, NíDhubháin, & Flint, 2011), or have postulated but not empirically demonstrated an association between different representations of rurality and the perceived role of forestry within those representations (Elands & Wiersum, 2001). A few studies have examined the way plantation forestry is evaluated by groups sharing various socio-demographic characteristics such as occupation (Selby, Koskela, & Petäjästö, 2007; Selby & Petajisto, 1995). For example, Neumann, Krogman and Harris (2007) observed local farmers concerns about the impact of hybrid poplar plantations to differ markedly from those of experts. However, community concern about the expansion of plantation forestry is not confined to those with specific ways of interacting with the rural landscape, such as an involvement in agricultural or forestry activities (Williams, 2009), nor can homogeneity in the meanings attributed to rural landscapes by members of pre-defined groups be assumed (Cheng, Kruger, & Daniels, 2003). To understand the association between place meanings and the construction of social knowledge about plantation forestry it is necessary to identify individuals attributing similar meanings to the rural landscape rather than assuming shared place meanings on the basis of a priori group membership.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Place theory and social representation theory as a framework for understanding conflicting beliefs

Social representation theory positions individual beliefs and knowledge as social in origin, acquired from other people and mediated by an individuals' belonging to a collective of others sharing similar views and experiences (Augoustinos, Walker, & Donaghue, 2006; Moscovici, 2005). A social representation is both a product and a process. As a product, a social representation is an organised set of concepts or shared beliefs and explanations (Moscovici, 1981). In the process of social representation, unfamiliar or disquieting social objects are made sense of through social interaction and discourse within the course of everyday life (Breakwell, 2001; Moscovici, 1981). A social object becomes 'known' and assumes a social reality through anchoring, the classification and naming of the object to locate it within a familiar context, and objectification, the conversion of the object to a more readily identifiable concrete or familiar 'image' (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations are shaped by the conventions and underlying motivations shared by the group (Joffe, 2003; Moscovici, 1981), legitimising particular knowledge systems while limiting and excluding conflicting versions of reality as a means to promote and protect the interests and identity of the group (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Breakwell, 1993; Howarth, 2006b; Joffe, 2003). Social representations are dynamic, constantly forming, reforming and re-negotiated within the group (Castro, 2006; Howarth, 2006b; Jovchelovitch, 1996). Individuals, groups and cultures can simultaneously hold multiple and contradictory representations of an object (Castro & Lima, 2001; Jovchelovitch, 1996); which representation is drawn upon will vary depending on the context and purpose of the representation (Castro, 2006; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005).

Social interaction and discourse between individuals sharing similar meanings is integral to the formation of a social representation. Social groups, defined as groups of interacting individuals sharing similar values, norms and rules (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1997), are distinguished by a shared understanding of the world and the objects within that world (Wagner & Hayes, 2005). It is proposed that shared place meanings provide the basis for a loose form of social milieu or communication system (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) within which a new or disquieting land use such as plantation forestry is interpreted. Physical space becomes place when it is invested with meaning (Cresswell, 2005). Place meanings encompass both "instrumental or utilitarian values as well as intangible values such as belonging, attachment, beauty, and spirituality" (Cheng et al., 2003, p. 89). Social constructionist approaches to place position meaning as socially constructed, constantly shaped and reshaped through everyday social interaction and discourse (Di Mazzo et al., 2011; Stokowski, 2008; Williams, 2008). As a social construction, places can be attributed with multiple and contested meanings and expectations for that place (Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997; Di Mazzo et al., 2011; Hubbard, 1996). Social conflict is likely to arise when different groups seek to impose particular meanings and expectations of appropriate behaviour and activities for a place (Cheng et al., 2003; Di Mazzo et al., 2011; Williams, 2008).

Most studies examining shared constructions of a resource use in relation to place-based concepts identify social groups either on the basis of various socio-demographic variables (Bonaiuto, Breakwell, & Cano, 1996; Bonaiuto, Carrus, Martorella, & Bonnes, 2002; O'Leary et al., 2000; Rogge, Nevens, & Gulinck, 2007; Selby et al., 2007) or identify groups post-analysis (Quétiér et al., 2010). While such approaches assume homogeneity in the meanings shared by group members, the construction of shared place meanings within specific social groups cannot be presumed. As

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