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Forestry professionalism overrides gender: A case study of nature perception in Germany

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ABSTRACT

Are women in the public forest services potential agents for change, as some authors have suggested? In this article, I hypothesise that professionalism conditions nature perception and overrides gender effects among foresters. Professionalism here includes expertise and exercise of control. Cultural Theory, especially the four 'nature myths' that have been adapted to it, ground the study theoretically, and data from two surveys ground the study empirically (survey of the German population (Kuckartz et al. 2006) and my own survey of German state foresters (2008)). The empirical findings support the hypothesis. Differences between foresters and the general public are bigger than between female and male foresters. Foresters, whether male or female, perceive nature as less ephemeral and less capricious than does the general public. Besides, they have a distinct cultural bias towards nature as tolerant but vulnerable to surpassing ultimate limits. Female foresters therefore do not change the profession's nature perception, at least not because of their gender. Questions that remain are: why does the percentage of women in forestry nevertheless remain low and how could change happen then?

1. Women as change agents?

The number of female foresters in the Western World has stagnated at a low level since women entered this profession. Besides, even when they are working in the profession, women are "primarily employed in administrative and support roles, with 'professional' women foresters tending to have specialist roles (i.e. research) or first-line junior management positions" (FAO, 2006, p. 11). Consequently, along with general equality endeavours in society, foresters have tried to increase the numbers of women in their profession. Aside from the normative social goal of equality, whose merit is self-evident, foresters argue for gender equality either based on the similarity of men and women or based on women's specific abilities that would benefit organisations. The FAO (2006, p. 72), for example, emphasises women's special qualities when it says that female foresters are significant as change or renewal agents or "desirable modernisers in a relatively conservative culture in need of change".

This motivation often presumes that gender influences forestry style. For example, Wonneberger et al. (2007, p. 53) assume that professional culture in public forest services "not only led and still lead to the exclusion of women, but also to a utilitarian view of nature, both restricting the potential for change". Reed (2008, p. 88) concludes from a study of gender roles in the Canadian forestry sector, that "because women held significantly different viewpoints from men in relation to forests and to decision-making processes, and because women were in minority on all committees across Canada, […] gender imbalance in forestry advisory committees reinforced a timber-extraction bias".

The U.S. Forest Service's programme on diversifying workplaces gender-wise, racially and professionally since the mid-1980s required detailed studies on the effects of gender ratio and other metrics on the agency's values. Brown and Harris found that there are "small, but significant differences in the attitudes and values of men and women in the Forest Service. All else being equal, women staff employees, in particular, express greater general environmental concern" (Brown and Harris, 2001, p. 255). Yet, they stress that many more differences were found for the staff than line officer subsample, suggesting that traditional agency socialisation practices may affect the employees' values and attitudes (ibid). Above all, they state clearly: "gender diversification is only one of many variables contributing to organisational change" (ibid., fn 8) and refer to their previous research that posits profession as the single most important variable affecting values and attitudes (Brown and Harris, 1993, pp. 98 et sequ.).

Besides, Brown and Harris (1998) analysed the adherence of natural resource managers in the U.S.A. to different forest management approaches with the "Land Ethic Political Test". The authors found statistically significant differences based on gender as well as age, years of experience, educational attainment, and, above all, profession. "The professional foresters and traditional commodity managers and staff embrace a more utilitarian land ethic than do the agency's natural scientists and non-commodity managers and staff"

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(ibid., p. 11). Thus, professional socialisation seems to be an important determinant of environmental attitude.

There are now two conflicting opinions on the effects of gender on the forestry profession's values: a) women have special qualities that suggest their role as potential change agents contributing to changes in the profession's values and b) the profession's values will not be influenced by a change in the gender ratio because professional socialisation is more influential. This study theoretically and empirically explores if there are gender differences among foresters and compares foresters with the general public so as to indicate the importance of the professional socialisation. The object of these comparisons is the perception of nature, as this is considered to be a main factor for how people decide about natural resources and consequent forest management styles.

2. Theoretical reflection on nature perception

Assuming that nature perception plays a crucial role in resource management decisions, presumed gender differences on nature perception only affect forest service resource management decisions if these differences are persistent: that is, independent of social context. Instead, I ground my argument in Cultural Theory, first applied to forestry by Schanz (1996). Cultural Theory states that perceptions of individuals are explained by their social relations (Thompson et al., 1990, pp. 1 et seqq.). It is based on the theory of Durkheim and Mauss (1987) that states congruence of the commitment to a particular institutional form of life with certain values and beliefs like nature perception, yet without arguing that belief systems directly replicate social structure, but acknowledging that the "individual retains a role in judging the plausibility of various worldviews and can even deny them belief if they do not correspond to his or her observations" (Spickard, 1989, p. 159).

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) laid the foundation of Cultural Theory and developed a two-dimensional model of social control (the grid-group-typology) that classifies the basic social relations that individuals are involved in and that make up their way of life (see Fig. 1). Thompson et al. (1990, pp. 5 et seqq.) further developed this framework and included different ways of nature perception. These 'nature myths' and their graphic representations (see Fig. 2) are grounded on studies of ecologists (Holling, 1986; Timmerman, 1986), who found that the reactions of ecosystem managers to similar natural events differ according to their perception of nature. This classification of nature perception is just a small part of the grid-group-typology. Here, it only serves to compare nature perception gender-wise and between foresters and non-foresters. 'Hierarchists' view nature as tolerant but vulnerable to surpassing ultimate limits ('nature as perverse/tolerant') and are characterised by a control management style. 'Individualists' consider the abundance of nature as an opportunity ('nature as benign') and are characterised by a pragmatic, trial-and-error management style. 'Egalitarians' prefer a cautious and preventive management style because they believe that ecosystems are very vulnerable ('nature as ephemeral'). 'Fatalists' regard nature as a lottery, rather than being controllable or manageable ('nature as capricious'), so that they only react to events

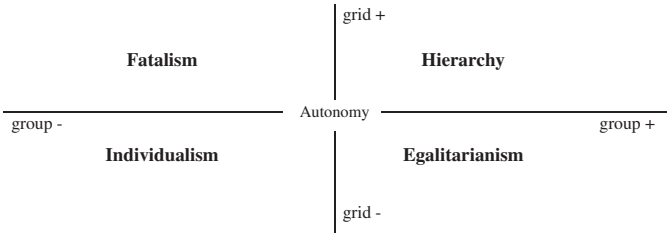

Fig. 1. The five viable "ways of life" in Cultural Theory, mapped onto the two dimensions of social control (own figure, cf. Thompson et al., 1990, p. 8).

(cf. Schwarz and Thompson, 1990, p. 66; Thompson et al., 1990, pp. 26 et seqq., pp. 43 et seqq.).

Thus, Cultural Theory doesn't attribute different ways of life and their associated nature perceptions directly to gender. Of course, socio-demographic factors can indicate social relations that individuals are involved, like Grendstad and Sundback (2003, 291 seqq.) showed. Similarly, a study of gender and race differences in risk perception (Flynn et al., 1994) supports the assumption that risk perception is rather dependent of socio-political factors, which may of course be connected to biological factors. As nature perception here mainly allegorises how nature reacts to human intervention, and how risky it is to interfere with nature, the consideration of this study on risk perception here is seen as plausible. The data showed that risk perception was highest in the group of non-white women, followed by non-white men and white women, while the group with the lowest risk perception was white men (Slovic, 1997, p. 4). Additionally, the group of white men whose risk perception was lowest among white men were characterised by better education, higher household income and more conservative values (ibid). The author concludes that "the present data thus move us away from biology and toward socio-political explanations. [...] Although the survey [...] was not designed to test these alternative explanations, the race and gender differences in perceptions and attitudes point toward the role of power, status, alienation, trust, perceived government responsiveness, and other socio-political factors, in determining perception and acceptance of risk" (ibid, p. 5).

As state foresters are committed to a particular institutional form of life characterised by their profession, I assume that their professionalism conditions their nature perception. As soon as women attain comparable professionalism and management responsibility to men, which includes respective social relations, gender differences in nature perception may vanish. It is possible that women, as newcomers in the profession, are treated or behave differently, or that men feel more comfortable with the organisational culture and traditions in forestry than do women. Still, both men and women must act professionally as foresters, and this role affects the (in-) appropriateness or (dys-) functionality of their nature perception.

3. Professionalism conditions nature perception

Under this theoretical approach, how does professionalism influence nature perception? Professionalism here includes expertise and exercise of control. Cultural Theory suggests that expertise plays a special role in the hierarchist's perception of nature, because "everything hinges upon mapping and managing the boundary line between these two states" [i.e., equilibrium and disequilibrium] and "certainty and predictability, generated by experts, become the dominant moral concern" (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 27). In contrast, "a hierarchist who came to believe, with individualists, that there was no limit on what nature could tolerate would no longer see any purpose in having experts to determine where those limits lie" (ibid., p. 29). Experts' important function in the hierarchical way of life becomes even more evident when we consider risk. Whereas the individualist sees risk as opportunity, the hierarchist is eager to choose the right procedure to control the risk. "Hierarchies are not at all squeamish about setting acceptable risk at high levels, as long as the decision is made by experts. Hierarchies inculcate respect for authority as long as decisions are made by the right people in the right place; experts are expected to do the right thing" (ibid., p. 63).

I follow from these theoretical reflections that experts, including foresters, much more strongly lean towards the hierarchist's perception than do non-experts. There would be no use of them if there was no need to determine the change-over point of nature's equilibrium state. Thus, their perception of nature cleaves to their social standing, and conversely lends meaning to their professional lives. The adherence of experts to this myth of nature also explains the