



Social organization and the transition from direct to indirect consumption [☆]

William G. Axinn ^{a,*}, Jennifer S. Barber ^a, Ann E. Biddlecom ^b

^a University of Michigan, USA

^b Guttmacher Institute, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a new theoretical framework for the study of environmental consumption at the micro-level by building on concepts from classical sociological theory and recent macro-level studies of the environment. The framework emphasizes the local community context as an important determinant of environmental consumption. We test this framework with unique micro-level data on consumption, household size, household affluence, and community context from Nepal, a setting in the midst of dramatic change in community organization, population size, and consumption behavior. The results of these tests are consistent with the hypothesis that local non-family organizations shift the consumption of environmental resources from direct to more indirect. We argue that the framework presented here is a useful early step toward more comprehensive micro-level models of environmental quality.

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1. Introduction

Human consumption of natural resources is generally identified as the key link between human behavior and degradation of the natural environment (Stern et al., 1997). Research on degradation of the environment has intensified recently, at least in part because it is believed to have broad consequences for humanity. As the social sciences become engaged in this research, social research has primarily focused on the total volume of human consumption. However, classical sociology suggests an important link between social organization and human consumption that influences type, as well as volume, of environmental consumption. We propose a general framework to study consumption patterns, which highlights changes in social organization. We apply this framework using unique micro-level measures from a setting in the midst of a dramatic consumption transition.

At the foundation of the framework we propose are two ideas borrowed from classical sociological theory. One is Durkheim's idea of the relationship between social change (such as improved communication and transportation, monetization, and population density) and the division of labor in society (Durkheim, 1984). The other idea is Marx's *metabolic rift* (Marx, [1867] 1976, [1863–65] 1981). As argued by Foster (1999), these classical sociological ideas have much to offer contemporary thinking about human relationships with the environment. These ideas suggest a relationship between social organization and the basic ways in which humans use their environment. Our framework integrates long-standing ideas about the

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* Corresponding author. Address: Institute for Social Research, 426 Thompson St., Ann Arbor, MI 48106, USA.
E-mail address: baxinn@umich.edu (W.G. Axinn).

volume of consumption with newer ideas about its social organization. A key contribution of our framework is to expand the conceptualization of changing social organization from the organization of production and consumption to the organization of a broader range of social activities. At the micro-level this framework points toward social organization as the key engine of a fundamental transition from direct to indirect consumption of the environment – a transition shaping both the nature and volume of consumption.

The empirical information to test this micro-level model of environmental consumption comes from a unique study in rural Nepal. Nepal is widely known as one of the world's most diverse ecological settings, but also as a setting on the brink of serious environmental degradation (Blaike and Brookfield, 1987; Eckholm, 1976; Zurick and Karan, 1999). The study combines community-level measures of social change with household-level measures of size, wealth, and consumption. The results provide valuable new insights into the micro-level processes of environmental consumption.

2. Concepts

2.1. Environmental consumption

Because the natural environment is the origin of all the raw materials that are ultimately consumed by human beings, all consumption affects the natural environment. Thus we begin with Stern's (1997) definition of environmental consumption as "Consumption of human and human-induced transformations of materials and energy," (p. 20). This broad definition of consumption includes many activities that are considered *productive* in social research terms. Issues revolving around this broad definition of environmental consumption, including the problem that use of such a broad definition makes it difficult to identify any consumption that is *not* environmental consumption, are discussed in great detail elsewhere (Stern et al., 1997).

To begin moving beyond this broad definition, we differentiate between two types of environmental consumption, *direct* and *indirect*, based on the social connections between the person consuming the resource and the natural resource itself. *Direct consumption* refers to humans' use of natural resources – including flora, fauna, water, and soil – with their own hands. An example of direct consumption is cutting down a tree or branch and burning it for heat. *Indirect* consumption refers to humans' use of goods that are separated by some type of social connections from the natural resources originally used to create them. By this definition, almost all consumption in industrialized countries is indirect because natural resources are processed (or at least moved) by people to create the goods that are ultimately consumed. However, even in a non-industrialized setting, indirect consumption may be widespread. Purchasing wood from someone else and then burning it for heat is an example. Other examples include buying food rather than growing it, purchasing building materials rather than collecting them, or purchasing clothes rather than making them. Changes in social organization that promote social arrangements that intervene between natural resources and consumers promote indirect consumption. Monetization and transportation are two such changes. Social organization that enhances opportunities for direct contact with resources promotes direct consumption. Hunting and gathering and subsistence agriculture are two such forms of organization of production. Note that this contrast between direct and indirect consumption is not aimed at understanding the overall influence on the environment, or the total environmental footprint (York et al., 2003a). Rather it is aimed at advancing our understanding of the processes of environmental change.

The environmental consequences of direct versus indirect consumption depend on the overall magnitude of consumption. Nonetheless, some evidence from around the world indicates that when humans consume natural resources directly, they create more effective management systems for those resources, which help preserve environmental quality in the long run (Chambers, 1997; Douglass, 1992; Ostrom, 1992). This seems reasonable because direct contact with the environment may clarify the link between ways of consuming and environmental degradation, and thus may motivate more careful management of environmental resources. This is an idea with which both classical and contemporary environmental sociology concur (Foster, 1999).

However, indirect consumption does not necessarily have a worse impact on the environment, nor does it preclude effective management systems to preserve long-term environmental quality. It may simply take time and investment to develop those systems. Nevertheless, the transition from direct to indirect consumption of environmental resources is a key change in the way that humans interact with the environment at the micro-level.

2.2. Social change

Many classical sociological treatments of social change focus on the mode of production, and the implications of those changes for social life (Durkheim, 1984; Marx, [1867] 1976; [1863–65] 1981). Durkheim (1984) argued that improvements in transportation and communication, the spread of monetization, and increased population density all stimulated the division of labor in society. The changing division of labor altered the mode of production, with widespread implications for social organization and social relationships. Marx ([1867] 1976; [1863–65] 1981), on the other hand, focused on the spread of the capitalist mode of production itself, its implications for the relationship between humans and the fruits of their labor, and its consequences for a broad array of social relationships. Both of these approaches begin with the idea that when technological and institutional contexts change, they alter individuals' daily lives across many different dimensions, not just

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