COMMENTARY

Environmentalism, norms, and identity

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Although environmental justice emerged as a research area in the 1970s, those facing environmental risk had analyzed their problems and mobilized for redress long before that time (1, 2). In the United States, ample research shows that the marginalized and the less affluent are more exposed to environmental threats than others. Pearson et al. (3) offer analyses that link the environmental justice literature to environmental social psychology and, in doing so, raise important issues for both research and engagement.

Pearson et al.'s (3) analysis provides insight into the environmental concerns of those most at risk. They replicate long-standing findings that in the United States, Asians, blacks, and Latinos all have higher levels of concern for the environment than whites, even when other aspects of position in the social structure (age, gender, income, etc.) are controlled. This greater concern contrasts with the relative dearth of minorities in environmental organizations and agencies and in the environmental sciences (4).

Many factors contribute to the disparity between level of concern and engagement. Pearson et al. (3) offer an important insight: the environmental belief paradox. In a US national survey, they find that Asians, blacks, and Latinos are more environmentally concerned than whites, but they perceive their communities as less concerned than whites. The same patterns exist for those with lower incomes: they perceive themselves as less concerned than they actually are. The finding is robust; it applies to both environmental concern and identification as an environmentalist. It also holds when the issue is framed as general environmentalism or concern with climate change.

The environmental belief paradox forms a bridge between the environmental justice literature and work in environmental social psychology where altruism is seen as crucial in addressing environmental issues. Altruism matters because environmental problems nearly always involve a tragedy of the commons that cannot easily be resolved by pure self-interest (5). It has long been argued that the disadvantaged will be more altruistic and the privileged less altruistic than others (6, 7). Norms form the bridge between altruistic values and environmental action (8). Several types of norms matter: (*i*) personal norms are an individual's beliefs about what they should do, (*ii*) prescriptive norms are an individual's beliefs about what they think others think they should do, (*iii*) behavioral norms are an individual's beliefs about what others are doing, and (*iv*) perceived norms are an individual's beliefs about what others think about an issue—the type of norms examined by Pearson et al. (3). All these norms are powerful drivers of personal behavior, including consumer behavior and support for political action.

Given the importance of perceived norms in shaping behavior, the environmental belief paradox could contribute substantially to the underrepresentation of Asians, blacks, and Latinos in the ranks of environmental professionals. It could also reduce their engagement in other forms of proenvironmental behavior, including actions as consumers and as citizens. Of course, discrimination, lack of opportunities and resources, and the pressing importance of a variety of other issues for minorities undoubtedly contribute as well; such patterns seldom have a single cause.

Elaborating the Theory

Models of how altruism can emerge through cultural evolution emphasize the importance of identifiable groups toward whom altruism is extended; it is much easier to develop altruism towards an ingroup compared to universal altruism (9). In turn, we are more sensitive to the norms of those with whom we identify—our community (10). There also is some suggestive evidence that the influence of norms is stronger for the less privileged than for the privileged, because the cost of mistakes is much higher for those

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with fewer resources (11). When someone is trying to assess how to deploy their time and commitment, they are likely to emphasize activities in which they believe members of their community are heavily engaged. If the environmental belief paradox holds, it could push those underestimating the concern in their community away from proenvironmental actions. Of course, many community-based organizations engage on a bundle of issues, including but not limited to the environment. Therefore, some environmental engagement by disadvantaged communities may also be hidden in these larger bundles of activism that are not necessarily labeled or identified as environmentalism.

What identities (and thus what communities) matter in shaping behavior? Group identification can be socially constructed around many individual characteristics. To some extent, we can construct our own identities, but our identities are also shaped by how others react to us via both inclusion and exclusion (12). Because of long histories of discrimination, race and ethnicity are certainly important sources of identity in the contemporary United States; gender identity, age, social class, religion, and political ideology also point us toward groups whose norms will guide our behavior. Of course, we are influenced by those in our social networks, and since we tend to associate with those we perceive as similar to us, network effects can reinforce our group identifications (13).

Our identities are, to some degree, fluid. Certainly, advertising and other forms of communications try to invoke specific identities in persuading us. We may also deploy different identities for different kinds of decisions. Whose norms matter when we make a decision—about how to vote, what kind of car to buy, what profession to pursue, or how many children to have? We have limited theory and evidence about how normative influences differ across domains of decision making. For some of us, identity may be quite fluid, whereas for others, especially those whose identity is strongly ascribed by others, a single identity may be dominant.

There is also a troubling effect of group identification. A small but growing body of evidence from the United States finds that those who believe that minorities have had undue advantage have lower support for environmental protection (14–16). They may be assuming that environmental protection is of most benefit to minorities and see this as part of a bundle of unwarranted benefits. It may be that strong identification with some groups may lead to decreased concerns for others outside that group. Here again, additional theory and evidence are needed.

Practical Implications

Encouraging Diversity in Environmental Professions. Pearson et al. (3) offer encouraging evidence that even simple messaging can help alleviate the environmental belief paradox. Providing respondents with a visual image of a diverse environmental group early in the survey seemed to shift perceptions so as to reduce the paradox. Relatively simple communication strategies could be a first step toward more engagement of underrepresented communities in environmental organizations and professions. Of course, real engagement with the underrepresented will require environmental professions and organizations to develop shared perspectives and agendas with them. Ultimately, this can lead to coproduction of knowledge and comanagement of solutions. What is required goes far beyond just messaging, and a variety of tools and approaches can guide such engagement (17, 18).

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Design Principles for Environmental Interventions. Actions by individuals and households cannot fully solve major problems such as climate change; however, individuals can make important contributions and can often do so rapidly, thus reducing risks and allowing time for other strategies to be deployed (19). A key design principle for promoting such actions is to provide information from trusted sources; norms matter (20). Here again, Pearson et al.'s (3) results provide a useful hypothesis for future work. It may be that Asians, blacks, Latinos, and the least affluent underestimate the amount of action being taken by their peers. Correcting those perceptions could help promote proenvironmental behavior, and the most effective way to do that may be through active collaboration and codesign with those communities.

Toward an Integrated Approach

Both the social psychological and the environmental justice literatures have provided important insights into the dynamics of environmental problems. But they have evolved independently of one another. Pearson et al. (3) show us that combining ideas from these two research traditions can substantially deepen our understanding, suggesting both lines of theory and practical insight into how to improve our practice. The urgent challenges of global environmental change should encourage more synthetic work that examines how identity and community influence environmental decision making.

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