The Impact of Culture and Race on Environmental Worldviews: A Study from the Southeastern U.S.

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigated the influences of race and culture on environmental worldviews of adult educator/activists in the southeastern U.S. It explored the roles of specific cultural practices and race relations which have been—and continue to be—significant factors affecting agency for environmental social transformation.

Culture and Race: Shapers of Environmental Worldviews

A *worldview* is a unifying frame of reference that allows an individual to conceptualize notions of self, society, and the universe—and to perceive and interpret her or his world. A worldview provides a framework for generating, maintaining, and applying knowledge. *Environmental worldviews* are peoples' multidimensional beliefs concerning their everyday role in the natural ecosystem and the built world (urban areas and infrastructures). They include an environmental ethic, and assumptions and values about how the world operates. Our environmental worldview determines the questions we ask and answer concerning environmental issues. The same or similar experiences can be interpreted by different people differently because of dissimilar worldviews. People's worldviews "are held in different ways across subgroups of the population" (Nooney, Woodrum, Hoban, & Clifford, 2003, p. 779).

Culture affects worldviews. A way of thinking about culture is that it is a shared meaning system, a context for educational efforts, and an avenue for learning. Culture is a repository for what social group members agree about; a spring for emotions and rational thought aligned with ideology. It is based on the unique history of a group of people intersecting with physical, social, economic, and political interests that are always dynamic and changing. To be certain, culture is learned, challenged, resisted, sustained, and transmuted through education. *Sociocultural context* is "the total life space in which individual development takes place" (Alfred, 2002, p. 7). Sociocultural context shapes thoughts and perceptions, maintains boundaries by limiting the range of acceptable behaviors, instills in its adherents a sense of the naturalness of its beliefs, and prescribes certain social arrangements (Eitzen & Zinn, 1995). The multiple interpretations an organization's participants give to ostensibly neutral facts are also seen as "culture" by some authors. Hemphill (1992) defines culture as "a system of public meanings, transmitted by means of symbols, that groups of humans employ to make sense of their existence" (p. 9). Culture asks, wittingly or unwittingly, "What counts as and for knowledge?" An analysis of culture helps to show how power, privilege, and social agency structure everyday life in society. *Race* is a socially and historically designed category that directs human organization into stratified units based on physical features that are (falsely) believed to be discrete, distinct, and reliable for creating a human typology. People's worldviews about the environment are impacted by notions of culture and race.

"People organize their culture's beliefs and values with what [are called]…*cultural models* [italics in original]" (Kempton, Boster, & Hartley, 1995, p. 10). These authors have identified the publics' view of the environment by describing cultural models of Americans.

They include: that humans are part of the (limited) environment and depend upon it; nature is interdependent, balanced and unpredictable; different parts of nature are so interdependent that altering one can have multiple linked chain reactions" (p. 43); the complex nature of interactions make disruptions impossible to predict; and humans should not interfere with ecological processes. They argue that data shows, with the exception of age, no social variables strongly and consistently correlate with public environmentalism—not elite status, nor class, race, education, or politics. We are left to wonder, "What generates environmental worldviews?"

Purpose of the Study, Theoretical Framework, and Research Design

The public's shifts in environmental worldviews since the first Earth Day in 1970 have been extensively studied. Researchers and scholars frequently mention the difficulty in transforming one's environmental worldview (see e.g., Finger & Asún, 2001). Miller (1996) remarks that "changing one's environmental worldview can be difficult and threatening, and can set off a *mindquake* [italics in original] that involves examining many of our most basic beliefs" (p. 716). There are few studies similar to this one which explore the impacts of culture and race on environmental worldviews. An exception is research on the influence of agricultural culture on environmental worldviews of North Carolinians (Nooney, et al., 2003). The literature shows that the level of people's *environmental consciousness* has been extensively examined. Environmental consciousness involves awareness and is our opening to the world. It is knowledge of environmental problems, understanding how the environment works (or should work), and a sense of social responsibility. There is often a spiritual dimension to consciousness. Major studies in this vein are summarized in Nooney, et al. (2003) and Mohai (2003). The data on environmental consciousness should be viewed skeptically since contradictions to this body of literature are legion.

While some studies explore factors influencing awareness of environmental issues (environmental consciousness) few scholars have interrogated the role that environmental consciousness plays in forming an environmental worldview—a frame of reference that shapes and guides thinking, believing, and doing. The purpose of this study was to examine how culture and race, in the southeastern U.S., help to establish an environmental worldview for adult educator/activists. Understanding the formation of environmental worldviews is important because it provides insights into environmental behaviors, including learning for social transformation. Research such as this is needed because adult educators have paid inadequate attention to environmental adult education in general, and to the intersection of race and culture on environmental adult education specifically, despite pressing environmental problems.

This study is based on *critical theory* using race and culture as lenses to ask questions and engage in depth analysis; an *environmental justice* frame is also employed. It is based on a cultural and race-based reading of an original critical ethnographic study by the author (Hill, 2005), funded through the Kellogg Foundation as part of the Cyril O. Houle Scholars in Adult and Continuing Education Program, that explored the actions of eight leaders from nine NGOs in the "deep south" (southeastern United States). The deep south is defined as that region "most southern" in its demography, economy, politics, and other characteristics (Glaser, 1994). It is here that "values…folkways and mores of the Old South took their strongest hold" (Glaser, 1994, p. 21) and continue to do so including through authoritarian politics (Permaloff & Grafton, 1995). History is only one factor in forming attitudes. The threat of "black political progress" (Glaser, 1994, p. 39) is also a root of subjective racism today.

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Data gathering and analysis for the original study is discussed in Hill (2005, pp. 52-54). A research question for this study, asked of the original data, was "What cultural and racial influences impact environmental worldviews of community adult educator/activists"? Original study interviews were reanalyzed in a way that the code categories were constructed with an intentionally biased reading for race and cultural elements. The results reported here are based on interviews with: Sharon, an educated, white, female in her late 20s, moved to the southeastern U.S. from the southwest. She was a paid employee for a national Euro-American-Centered environmental group at the time of the interview. Kecia is an African American woman working from an environmental justice perspective in a grassroots organization on a combination of environmental issues. In the organizing model I have proposed, her group can best be described as following the Civil Rights Model. Jeri is a woman of color, educated, in her mid-50s. She moved to the southeast from a southwest Asian country, and is married to an African American man. She works with two environmental organizations, both of which incorporate a Mixed-Model, but with more emphasis on African-American-Centered processes. Peter, a middle-aged, educated, white male is from a group that operates from a Bureaucratic type of organization.

Strategies of Group Processes

The original study found several types of environmental groups in the U.S. southeast. One is what I call African-American-Centered groups (Hill, 2005) who have developed a "Consciousness from the Margins," based on a Collectivist/Civil Rights Model (social justice is at the core), and the other is by Euro-American-Centered groups that exploit a more "dominant culture" perspective and utilize a "Status Quo Consciousness" based on a Corporate-Business Model (environmental ideologies are at the core). It is important to note that both groups have membership across color lines; however, usually one race constitutes the majority in any given group. Perhaps this is because, "historically, interethnic collective action has been rare in the United States, above all in areas plagued by segregation" (Moberg, 2001, p. 167). Some organizations employ a Mixed-Model, sharing qualities from both group types. This is often reflected in their membership. One participant from a Mixed-Model group offers,

Our membership is the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich….There's different types of people. Some of our poorest members know about…oppression. There are different types of oppression and being kept down, and that's, that's a whole other subject. The, uh, there's those who are more affluent….There's those who do have the means to make a difference, and have indignation at what's happening.

"Observers of American environmentalism note significant strategic differences among predominantly white organizations…[however they] share a common 'conservationist' discourse….In contrast, environmental justice movements regard the siting of polluting industries in minority communities as a form of racial injustice [and] demand redress" (Moberg, 2001, p. 166, citing Čapek, 1993).

Findings

Racial and Cultural Differences in Environmental Organization Members' Worldviews

The African-American-Centered groups' Civil Rights Model operates from a worldview of social justice informed by race relations—historic and contemporary. They draw "on the discourse of the civil rights movement, extending its demands for equal treatment to the arena of public health" (Moberg, 2001, p. 166) and the environment. African-American-Centered groups lean toward "things sentient"—that is, their environmental worldview has emotional, relational, and feeling components. It is specifically *oriented toward people*, and is centered on

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interpersonal relations; Social behavior is followed by social action. It incorporates a sense of kinship. Jeri helps us to understand how black experiences inform her environmental worldview. She reported that the local government planned to develop segregated neighborhoods, and to place landfills within them. She said,

They sited these landfills in areas that they *knew* [emphasis] were going to be predominantly African American, there's *no if ands or buts* [emphasis] about it…When my husband and I came here in 1986…we came here with a significant amount of money…and we tried to buy a home [in an up scale neighborhood], but guess what? The realtors were *not* [emphasis] forthcoming about us buying homes in *that* [emphasis] part of the county, and they directed us down here....Because it's predominantly *African American* [emphasis]…because we were not white, that's right, because we're people of color…we were not right [for] the [up scale] neighborhood, so to speak.

Her environmental worldview, or what constitutes an environmental ethic and the assumptions about how the world operates, have developed, in part, from this experience. It has led her to distrust government when participating in environmental decision-making. She had strong words,

We network with many organizations throughout the county but we're *constantly* [emphasis] having to check *them* [our politicians] to make sure that *our* [emphasis] interests are being taken care of *before* [emphasis] their interests are being taken care of, so this is a *terrible* [emphasis] situation. I'm here to tell you that there is *CORRUPTION* [loud with emphasis] in local government and I will go on *RECORD* [loud with emphasis] to say that it has to *stop* [emphasis]…these individuals have to be *ROUTED* OUT [loud with emphasis] because they are a cancer on our society.

The Euro-American-Centered groups' worldviews stress the value of "things sapient" the cognitive, empericist, positivist ways of knowing and meaning making. These are tendencies from corporate-bureaucratic culture. I employ the term "Status Quo Consciousness" as a reflection of bureacratic culture: administrative execution of ideas, regularized proceedures, formal division of responsibility, and consciousness of social norms—even if contested.

Socio-Economic Location

Socio-economic location influences worldviews by providing a sense of what is practically and politically feasible. Culturally relevant environmental worldviews result from an individual's location. Environmental justice educator/activists in African-American-Centered groups "come from the most alienated and passive ranks of society, middle America, where politics seems remotes and pointless" (Edwards, 1995, p. 38). Jeri supports this notion, saying, "If we didn't have to constantly…be a watchdog and be putting out fires we could be much *more* [emphasis] proactive in doing things…. You know how *hard* [emphasis] it is for me to find somebody who is in power who is not crooked? Peter's environmental worldview includes notions of living in a salubrious location. He said, "Our goal[s are] safe and healthy place[s] to live and raise our families. We…buried a child. We have a lot of members here with buried children. We've been lied to….Um, we've, we've been violated."

Prior Political Experience

Prior political experience influences an individual's worldview, however, many people coming to environmental organizations have no prior political experience. It is from local events that people become political, and from which their environmental worldview develops. Jeri

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draws attention to this fact, saying that involvement happens when issues "come closer to home for people—it's garbage—it's cars that have been abandoned…where people live. You know, it's something they can feel and touch and see." Their awareness develops through educational efforts, Jeri claims, "we [her local African-American community] have some catching up to do when it comes to being…environmentally astute…but we're doing a lot better [after several years of work] and we're getting there, yeah….Education plays a *huge* [emphasis] role." Some have faith in people moving the political system toward protecting the public good. Sharon, from a traditional, mainstream Euro-American-Centric environmental group, for instance said, "Politics is *definitely* a *H-U-G-E* factor, *H-U-G-E*…because until the Senators feel pressure from the other side [they will not act]…will only get the call that says 'Don't protect!' They'll never get the call that says 'Protect!'" A worldview shapes and guides lives, and the actions taken. Peter, from a Euro-American-Centric organization, has a worldview that says litigation is the most appropriate action for redressing environmental ills.

Cooperation and confrontation

Environmental worldviews influence notions of cooperation and confrontation. For instance, Sharon was surprised that the southern culture had so heavily influenced the worldview of members of her organization: gracious behavior supercedes other manners. She reported,

People in the South will say "Yes" to you when they really mean "No." They're polite, they're very polite…[there are] ground rules…"passion with politeness"… I'm like, I'm *SO* [emphasis added] in the South.

Environmental worldviews are often constructed from beliefs in environmental conservation rather than specifically on human communities in Euro-American-Centric groups. Sharon's concerns, centered on aquatic life, have caused her conflict with local residents in the watershed where she works when they resist conservation efforts. They say to her,

Oh, you must be talking about snail darters. We know enough about [the endangered] snail darters. We hate snail darters. Goddamn snail darters out there—I want to fry a snail darter. You know the Cherokee Indians used to eat snail darters….Why don't ya'll care about a fish we can eat'?...you know [they say], 'Why are ya'll worried about these damn little fish that don't matter?'

The notion that people have the right to do as they please, called "individualism" in the environmental literature, is part of an environmental worldview. It is in contrast to "communitarianism" defined as doing what is best for the public good (See, Bellah, et al., 1985). Portney (1992) reports that clashes of worldviews inherent in individualism and communitarianism "constitute the major foundations…of environmental controversies in the United States" (p. 21).

Beliefs About Relationships with People

Beliefs, about relationships, are shapers of environmental worldviews. Connecting with people not only means building capacity to promote an issue, but Jeri tells us,
Networking [is] absolutely [emphasis] invaluable. I've learned through…experience you can only work so long by yourself….You've got [emphasis] to network and have partnerships…as many [emphasis] as you can, um, and somehow find a way of keeping in touch…[to] let [people] know that you're alive and kicking, and keep them informed.

Beliefs About History

Historical events shape worldviews, and environmental ones are no exception. Sharon said, "I think the South is still recovering from the Civil War? I think they were beaten down very badly and they have this ego thing, 'We have got to rise at all costs….We're going to do whatever [it takes]." This translates into weak notions of environmental conservation for some.

Very powerfully, Kecia recalls the African American history of slavery and its role in developing an environmental worldview for her. History lingers; she adds, "Plantation politics is still alive and well and people can be intimidated not to participate in the environmental debate, the environmental work, the environmental movement."

Conclusions & Implications: Adult Education and Environmental Worldviews

This study illustrates some ways that race and culture influence environmental worldviews. Worldviews are paradigms; they are how we perceive what is "real" and the response to that perception. For participants in this study, the perception of environmental crisis from various worldviews has led to educational responses. Education is a key component in the participants' worldviews. For example, Jeri a Gramscian organic intellectual, offered, "Everything we do is education because we ourselves, I mean, we're lay people, we're not professors, we're not environmentalists, we're just everyday folk and, uh, we have to educate ourselves first." Regardless of the Models followed by the groups, worldviews empower environmental adult educator/activists in a number of ways. This research highlights how in the southeastern U.S., there are different environmental worldviews employed by groups for social change. The various strategies have been heavily influenced by culture and historical legacies of race. It illustrates how environmental paradigms are constructed by people in their particular settings. Society is transformed by actors contending in a variety of socio-political arenas where specific cultural practices and race have been, and continue to be, significant factors.

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