

Poverty, social attitudes and environmental planning

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Abstract

It is common belief that minorities living in poor neighborhoods are exposed more frequently to environmental toxins. Because minorities are basically marginalized people in our society, nobody notices or cares. An environmental racism exists wherever low income or minority communities bear a disproportionate exposure to the pollutants put into the environment by major corporations. Hazardous waste sites are all too often placed in already blighted communities inhabited by racial minorities and the poor.

Large-scale projects concerning urban planning and transportation improvements have been launched, or are programmed to be launched, in every country. The success of these projects depends upon the agreement of all the social agents, not only of the main group of the population. More specifically, the acceptance of these projects from the least privileged groups is essential since a large part of them are dealing with infrastructure or recreational constructions in the areas of the city that are inhabited mainly from people belonging to these least privileged groups

1.1. Keywords: Social Poverty, Social Attitudes, Environmental Racism, Environmental Planning

Introduction

An environmental racism exists wherever low income or minority communities bear a disproportionate exposure to the pollutants put into the environment by major corporations. Hazardous waste sites are all too often placed in already blighted communities inhabited by racial minorities and the poor. A cross-cultural understanding of factors affecting environmental attitudes is necessary before we can move toward more effective environmental policies and institutional actions designed to increase environmentally friendly behavior. So, to design a democratic program of urban planning in a multicultural society, it is essential to take into accounts the opinions and attitudes of social minorities with different cultural characteristics. The reasons mentioned

were the main motives for conducting the research on the environmental attitudes of various cultural groups.

1.2. Social exclusion and environmental attitudes

Social exclusion is considered to be a multifaceted phenomenon with three principal dimensions: economic, social, and political (Bessis 1995). The economic dimension of exclusion concerns deprivation of such things as a regular income, good housing, pleasant neighborhoods, and local environment. The social dimension concerns the loss of links with mainstream society, reluctance to accept the role of social institutions, and the denied use of mainstream services.

The social dimension of exclusion is very often associated with the development of religious or Mafia-type networks. The political dimension of social exclusion is associated with an unwillingness of involvement in political action and, at the extreme form, total waiver of political rights. Several researchers have shown that exclusion affects social attitudes or behaviors, causing negative effects such as unsocial behavior and unwillingness to participate in the educational system (Bessis 1995; Modood and Berthoud 1997; Young 1999).

However, very few attempts have been made to investigate the consequences of social exclusion on the development of environmental concern. Mohai and Bryant (1998), for example, have shown in their studies that cultural differences received very little support from experimental results as a possible explanation for the differences in environmental concern between Whites and African Americans. In fact, factors associated with the social marginalization of African Americans (such as environmental deprivation, smaller availability of resources, and a negative sense of personal efficacy) received greater support as possible explanations. Klineberg et al. (1998) followed a similar line of reasoning in their study of environmental concern determinants in Black, Hispanic, and Anglo-American groups.

Concern about environmental issues over the last 30 years has led to an increased interest in people's environmental perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Recent research is not restricted to the investigation of general environmental attitudes; rather, there are systematic attempts to identify factors underlying the development of certain environmental attitudes

(Klineberg et al. 1998; McFarlane and Boxall 2000). Factors such as social paradigms and attitudes, value systems, and religious beliefs have attracted the attention of many researchers (e.g., Steel et al. 1990; Tanner 1999; Kaiser and Shimoda 1999; Hernandez et al. 2000; Schultz, Zelezny, and Dalrymple 2000). The most commonly investigated factors include age, social class, type of residence, ideology, and gender (see brief reviews in Dietz et al. 1998; Fransson and Garling 1999). Such research is considered important, among other things, for the design of educational programs, environmental protection policies, and urban design policies (Mohai 1992; Bourke and Luloff 1994; Vlek 2000; Trakolis 2001).

Nevertheless, there is an important dimension in modern societies that has not received much attention. This is the multiculturalism of modern societies and the way in which being a member of a cultural group could affect environmental perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of a person. Indeed, researchers agree that very little research has been done concerning cross-cultural studies on environmental attitudes or behavior of different ethnic, cultural, or religious groups (see relevant comments, as well as brief reviews in Klineberg 1998; Schultz and Zelezny 1999). Relevant studies have been concerned with comparisons either between different countries, or between cultural groups living in the same area. For example, Schultz and Zelezny (1998; 1999), Bechtel et al. (1999), and Schultz, Zelezny, and Dalrymple (2000) attempted cross-national studies of values, religious beliefs, and other cultural variables underlying environmental concern and revealed important variations within groups, while Noe and Snow (1990), Schultz, Unipan, and Gamba (2000), Mohai (1990), Jones and Carter (1994), Mohai and Bryant (1998), Klineberg et al. (1998), and Klineberg (1998) examined the relevant validity of ethnicity, culture and other potential predictors of environmental attitudes between Anglos, Blacks, and Hispanics living in the United States. Results of the projects undertaken until now have shown that the topic has much to reveal, since cultural fragmentation of modern urban societies, due to the presence of different ethnic, cultural, or religious groups, has important consequences on the success of environmental awareness policies (Schultz and Zelezny 1999). Cross-cultural studies in Europe are limited and restricted to comparisons between population groups living in different countries (e.g., Meseke 1994; Gooch 1995; Kaiser and Biel 2000, Paraskevopoulos et al. 2003).

1.3. Social poverty and the environmental racism

It is common belief that minorities living in poor neighborhoods are exposed more frequently to environmental toxins. Because minorities are basically marginalized people in our society, nobody notices or cares. An environmental racism exists wherever low income or minority communities bear a disproportionate exposure to the pollutants put into the environment by major corporations. Hazardous waste sites are all too often placed in already blighted communities inhabited by racial minorities and the poor.

Although some writers such as David Friedman (1998) claim that no such hazard exists and that businesses are being unduly oppressed by prohibitions against development for “unreasonable environmental reasons”(p. 75), in general, there is not much disagreement that minorities and poor people are disproportionately affected by poor environmental quality. Studies show that when poor people bring lawsuits, they collect fewer damages and smaller settlements than people who live in richer neighborhoods. It takes longer to clean up a contaminated site in a poor neighborhood than it does in a wealthier community. Poor people die more frequently from pollution-connected diseases, and a higher percentage of minority children have elevated levels of lead in their bloodstreams (Warriner, McSpurren, & Nabalamba, 2001).

The Environmental Justice Movement, in U.S., tries to go beyond traditional concerns about cleaning up the environment and to include addressing social inequality. Many of the people involved are women, working-class people, and people of color who have never been activists before, but they are concerned about their children’s health (Warriner, McSpurren & Nabalamba, 2001). If it is true that minorities are at greater risk from hazardous substances the question to be answered is, “How do pollutants get distributed so unequally and what can be done about the problem?”

One explanation is that industry wants to spend as little money as possible, and land in poorer areas is cheaper. Industry selects a site on the basis of where they can make the most profit. Industrial areas with low property values are likely to be near areas where residential property values are also low. Thus, industrial pollution becomes concentrated near low-income populations. Questions concerning the intent of US corporations immediately arise. Do big businesses target minority groups and the poor? That is, are these polluting corporations actually racist, or are there reasons other than demography that these neighborhoods are chosen? And further, is the effect of placing hazardous waste sites in lower income communities entirely detrimental to those communities? It is possible that some facets of the environmental racism debate may work in the favor of those populations that appear, prima

facie, to be disadvantaged by the existence of these sites. A study in Michigan, for example, revealed industrial and waste disposal facilities, contaminated sites and leaking underground storage tanks were 30% more likely in Wayne County, which includes Detroit, where the population is low-income, black, and urban (Warriner, McSpurren, & Nabalamba, 2001).

Another explanation is that low-income people and minorities lack political clout. They are not generally well-organized for social action in their neighborhoods. When the government and industry leaders make decisions that affect the environment, they don't consider what objections could come up because usually there aren't any. Perhaps these officials have no intention of polluting low-income neighborhoods (as opposed to polluting affluent neighborhoods), but their policies of risk management may be flawed so that minorities are disproportionately impacted. Groups that do organize to resist industrial polluters are generally plagued by lack of funding, while the industries they want to fight have enormous financial, technical, and legal resources. "The vast majority of case studies have shown [when] local protesters are pitted against a well-financed corporate polluters, the chances of victory are slim, and likely to take a long time" (Warriner, McSpurren, & Nabalamba, 2001).

The third and most contentious explanation charges unequal distribution of pollutants and hazardous toxins to environmental racism. In this explanation race is a major factor. Research findings suggest, "...racism may be playing a role in the decision-making process". Industrial decision-makers frequently choose minority areas for disposal and industrial facilities. Concentrations of pollution are simply reflections of inherent injustice in the system. In other words, poor environmental quality in minority areas is a symptom of institutional discrimination. Thus a variety of groups, organizations, and such are implicated—probably, they don't intend any harm, but their policies result in negative outcomes for poor areas and the people living in them. On the one hand, environmental problems are inseparable from poor economic conditions, and the poorest economic conditions clearly plague primarily racial minorities and the poor. A typical major corporation will choose to "dispose of its waste product at the minimum cost to itself, despite the potential effects to others, thereby shifting its production costs to the general public, that is, to the commons" (Brook 2001). Thus, throughout the United States, contaminants will be emitted into the air and toxic waste will be discharged into the waterways in the "lowest rent" areas. Because the most cost-effective portions of the "commons" will be those in the poorest communities, the "burden of industrial waste" will ultimately fall "more heavily on black and brown than on white" (Szasz, as quoted in

Brook 2001). This is tantamount to environmental racism.

On the other hand, given the above, is it fair to say that major corporations are racist, and actually target racial minorities and the poor? It is not in fact clear that this is the case. Industrial corporations looking to create hazardous waste sites are attracted to specific regions because they are cost efficient. That the populations of these cost efficient regions are racial minorities is an unfortunate consequence of corporate bargain hunting. Indeed, as proponents of environmental justice have sought support in government for lower income communities, it has been historically difficult to prove that corporations have a discriminatory intent when making their selections for potentially harmful facilities (Huebner 1999). In Canada for instance, a housing development was built where formerly a waste landfill was located. Officials who approved the development knew it had been a waste landfill, but the project was going to be profitable. Buyers did not know when they bought the property what was going to be underneath them. In another place a housing development was built on top of a former waste landfill; methane gas accumulated and caused explosions, and eventually everybody had to move out. The city knew about the presence of methane but kept it secret to "prevent panic." By "coincidence" the people living there were low-income people.

However, the effect of placing hazardous waste sites in poor areas on legislation has been considerable. In California in 2001, then-governor Davis gave approval for four environmental justice bills designed to keep low income neighborhoods from having an unfair share of installations placed near them that produce pollution (Wiley, 2001). Further, a 1997 finding by the US Circuit Court of Appeals allows individuals the private right of action to raise Title VI claims based on "disparate impact" against perpetrators of environmental injustice (Huebner 1999). Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (1964) insists that no one be subjected to discrimination "under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" on the grounds of "race, color or national origin" (Huebner 1999). As such, those fighting against environmental racism need only prove that a disparate impact, or discriminatory effect, has been felt by a poor community in order to win a claim against corporate America. In this, whether the placing of hazardous waste sites is intentionally motivated or not, that an adverse effect on the poor results is enough to warrant legal action.

A curious effect, however, of the placing of hazardous waste sites in lower income communities is that poor people gravitate towards them once they are there. Minority and poor populations find the lower cost of living in industrial communities appealing, and move to

them to capitalize on the economic benefits of living there (Huebner 1999). Many communities can thus become disproportionately poor after hazardous waste sites are developed, thus rendering disparate impact claims groundless. Also, industrial sites offer jobs. Poor communities can be bolstered by the presence of hazardous waste sites. Conservatives will argue that where environmental activists fight to keep factories out of impoverished communities, they actually hurt those that they claim to be protecting by taking potentially lucrative jobs away from those who need them the most (Bluey 2003).

Regardless of whether one accepts any of these explanations for how the unequal distribution of toxins happens, it can't be denied that socio-economic class is always a factor where toxic risks are present. Race issues are always part of it, although measures to assess prejudice are never part of the research data, so it can't be proven with empirical research that environmental racism exists—at least, so far. Nevertheless, minorities are suffering more from the effects of poor environmental quality.

On the bright side, an article titled "Talking Race" (2003) claims "After two decades of protest against the allocation of toxic waste sites in predominantly poor black and aboriginal communities, American environmental justice advocates can claim significant wins: federal legislation aimed at protecting the interests of minority communities, several court victories, halted industrial projects and, perhaps most importantly, credibility for their claims" (p. 3). Of course, there is more work to be done.

1.4. For a Social Environmental Planning

Certainly, it would help if urban planners could be more sensitive to issues of clean air and water, avoiding pollution and other risks, when they make their decisions. Moreover, environmental problems can't really be separated from problems of poverty, racism, sexism and unemployment. At the risk of sounding anti-capitalist, economic growth should not be allowed to take precedence over environmental health. Decisions should be made on the basis of meeting human and ecological needs and enhancing the quality of life. Democracy demands that minorities and poor people be allowed to speak and have equal voices and the environmental threats should be eliminated before they happen instead of trying clean up a big mess afterwards.

Large-scale projects concerning urban planning and transportation improvements have been launched, or are programmed to be launched, in every country. The success of these projects depends upon the agreement of all the social agents, not only of the main group of the population. More specifically, the acceptance of these

projects from the least privileged groups is essential since a large part of them are dealing with infrastructure or recreational constructions in the areas of the city that are inhabited mainly from people belonging to these least privileged groups.

Moreover, to design a democratic program of urban planning in a multicultural society, it is essential to take into accounts the opinions and attitudes of social minorities with different cultural characteristics. The reasons mentioned were the main motives for conducting the research on the environmental attitudes of various cultural groups. Furthermore, I believe that the improvement of ecological attitudes and public participation in ecological activities could play an important role in social integration and the strengthening of social coherence (Mohai 1990). Within this framework, the present research was the preliminary step for the design of future projects on using environmental awareness as a mean for encouraging the social participation of the least privileged groups.

A cross-cultural understanding of factors affecting environmental attitudes is necessary before we can move toward more effective environmental policies and institutional actions designed to increase environmentally friendly behavior (Klineberg 1998; Schultz and Zelezny 1999).

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