# Environmentalism and Community: Connections and Implications for Social Action

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study explored conceptualizations of environmentalism and community, as well as the connections of ethnicity to these concepts in a small but diverse sample. Semistructured interviews were conducted with eight participants and included a conceptual content cognitive mapping procedure. The resulting maps were examined for themes and ideas about the key concepts and the connections between them. Participants' ideas about environmentalism reflected beliefs about social responsibility and environmental protection. Participants viewed community in a number of ways but generally seemed to see it as a social unit that binds people together and cultivates values and action. Most participants did not perceive ethnicity as an important force affecting environmentalism in their lives, but their ideas about ethnicity did seem to anchor thoughts about community form and function. The conceptual content cognitive mapping process revealed unique ways that participants perceived these concepts and their inter-relationships. For example, it highlighted how community might rally people around environmental issues through participatory processes, as well as the ways that it might be a conduit for spreading knowledge and values about ethnicity and environmentalism. In addition to providing information that might be used to promote environmental action, the results of this investigation inform the study of social action by demonstrating that a number of concepts shape people's perceptions of social issues.*

One way to think about environmental problems is to focus on their social aspects, including the ways that environmental problems affect human beliefs and behaviors, and the ways that human beliefs and behaviors affect environmental quality (Oskamp, 2000a, 2000b; Oskamp & Schultz, 2006; The American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Interface between Psychology and Global Climate Change, 2009). From this perspective, the quality of the environment is a social issue. The ways people understand social issues and see them as connected to their lives are potentially important determinants of social action (Snyder & Omoto, 2007).

Social scientific research has focused on determinants of beliefs, concerns, and behaviors that are relevant to environmental quality, including how they can be construed as pathways to environmental engagement. Some of these determinants or influences include demographic and socioeconomic factors, specific types of value orientations, people's sense of connection and identity with nature, and the ways exposure and access to nature affect people's development, health, and sense of well-being (e.g., Clayton & Opotow, 2003; Dunlap & Van Liere, 1984; Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Schultz *et al.*, 2005; Schultz & Zelezny, 1998; Stern *et al.*, 1993; Taylor *et al.*, 1998; Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980). In this qualitative study, we considered people's conceptualizations of specific topics (i.e., environmentalism and community, especially ethnic community) as additional pathways to environmental engagement. Moreover, we focused on the multiple and complex interconnections between these conceptions, an approach that has the potential to provide insight into the psychological contexts that give rise to environmentally relevant social action.

Notions of environmentalism may encompass concerns about environmental quality, including its social aspects. Its meaning is

DOI: 10.1089/eco.2010.0069

likely to be context dependent, and to refer to a range of activities and identities, including involvement in a social movement, the role of an activist, and behaviors like picking up litter. People's understanding of environmentalism may help them conceptualize and identify with issues of environmental quality, or even provide contrast for their own beliefs, and further may be an impetus or barrier for social action related to the environment.

People's involvement with their communities is another potential influence on their engagement in environmental issues, particularly in the ways community, or interactions with any number of communities, facilitates learning, helps define and frame values, and fosters involvement in social issues (Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Snyder & Omoto, 2007). An individual's sense of community, including how community is conceptualized and included in one's identity, may be unique, but it is likely to be related to a range of community-relevant activities (e.g., McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Obst *et al*., 2002; Obst & White, 2007; Omoto & Malsch, 2005). By exploring conceptualizations of community and their linkages to those of environmentalism in this research, we sought to explore potentially important driving or inhibiting forces of environmental engagement.

Among the communities most salient to people in the United States are racial and ethnic communities. Moreover, research on environmental attitudes and issues suggests that, despite similar levels of overall environmental concern and proenvironmental beliefs between racial groupings, there are differences in how members of racial groups think about, prioritize, and engage in environmental issues due, for example, to specific cultural values or to socio-structural factors that promote or preclude engagement (e.g., Johnson *et al*., 2004; Jones, 1998; Jones & Rainey, 2006; Mohai & Bryant, 1998; Parker & McDonough, 1999).

Broad and quantitative exploration of group-based differences was beyond the scope of this study. Instead, we included a diverse sample in recognition of potential differences in perspective, and also to provide an anchor for conceptualizations of community (i.e., ethnic community) across participants. Thus, participants in this study described their conceptualizations of environmentalism and community (including ethnic community), and then completed a cognitive mapping exercise that explored the connections between these conceptualizations. The purpose of this phenomenological approach was to advance understanding of potential psychological pathways to environmental concern and engagement, and especially by exploring how environmental and social action might be construed from the vantage point of multiple and interlocking lenses and perspectives.

## Methods

Individuals qualified for the study if they were English-speaking adults over the age of 18 and residents of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Recent experience with the natural environment was included as an additional qualification because we expected that people who had had such experiences would also have more developed or accessible understandings of environmentalism.

### *Recruitment and sampling procedures*

A short online survey was used to identify people who were interested in participation and who had visited a "natural outdoor area such as a national forest/desert or a national or state park" in the last year, and included asking them to list up to six such locations. Respondents also reported their birth year, race (Asian/Asian-American, Black/African-American, Latino/Hispanic, White/Caucasian, Other), and educational achievement (high school, college/trade school, etc.).[1] Finally, respondents indicated if they would be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview, conducted in English, related to environmentalism and other social issues, in exchange for $30. Interested participants were asked to provide contact information.

Notices about the study, including electronic hyperlinks to the recruitment survey, were distributed through the Los Angeles area Craigslist™ Web site[2] and through the listservs of several local environmental organizations. A total of 136 adults completed the screening survey, of which 65 met study qualifications, indicated a willingness to participate, and provided contact information.

Respondents were telephoned by the first author (a doctoral student in psychology) and invited to participate in a face-to-face interview session on a first-contact-first-schedule basis, although we did attempt to keep the sample balanced in terms of race and gender. During this telephone call, the interviewer disclosed that in addition to topics of community and environment, participants would be asked to talk about their racial or ethnic heritage. A final sample of eight participants, all of whom took part voluntarily, completed

[1]We did not target other major American racial groups (e.g., American-Indian or Alaskan-Native) in our recruitment, and respondents who reported an "other" racial identification were excluded from the interviews.

[2]Mention of a trademark is for reporting purposes and in no way indicates support or preference for a particular brand name by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**Table 1. Demographic Composition of Sample and Selected Conceptual Content Cognitive Mapping Results**

| PSEUDONYM | AGE[a] | GENDER | EDUCATION | ETHNICITY/RACE[b] | NO. OF 3CM ITEMS | NO. OF 3CM GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Doris | 36/37 | Female | Advanced degree | Taiwanese-American | 15 | 3 |
| Paul | 28/29 | Male | Undergraduate degree | Korean-American | 17 | 2 |
| Josephine | 31/32 | Female | Undergraduate degree | Black/African-American | 26 | 7 |
| George | 32/33 | Male | Undergraduate degree | Black/African-American | 24 | 4 |
| Katherine | 28/29 | Female | Undergraduate degree | Mexican-American | 32 | 5 |
| Judy | 46/47 | Female | Undergraduate degree | Mexican-American | 25 | 3 |
| Shirley | 18/19 | Female | High school diploma (current college student) | White/Caucasian | 18 | 6 |
| John | 36/37 | Male | Advanced degree | White/Caucasian | 29 | 8 |

[a]Age ranges are approximated because only year and not exact date of birth was collected.

[b]Ethnic designations reflect the heritage participants reported that they most closely identified with, rather than strict racial groupings.

3CM, conceptual content cognitive mapping.

interviews. Of these eight participants, two identified themselves as Asian/Asian-American, two as Black/African-American, two as Latino or of Hispanic ethnicity, and two as White/Caucasian.[3] Pseudonyms and descriptive characteristics of participants are shown in Table 1. The final sample consisted of five women and three men who lived in urban or suburban Los Angeles and who ranged in age from young adult to middle age. One participant was a first-year college student, five held college or trade school degrees, and two held advanced degrees. Although all participants had recent experience with outdoor areas, their use varied in frequency and intensity. Some actively engaged in activities like trail running and hiking, whereas others were more casual visitors to natural areas and spent more time in urban outdoor environments. All participants reported engaging in some form of consumption management (e.g., recycling, using canvas grocery bags, and driving less often). In summary, the sample was demographically diverse and had a range of experience, knowledge, and connection to environmental issues or the natural environment.

[3]One additional participant was excluded from analysis because not all of her responses were tape-recorded, and another because he did not complete the cognitive mapping exercise.

### *Interview procedures*

*Describing discrete concepts.* Interviews were all conducted by the first author in private rooms at the university or a public library, recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed. Each interview began with a few rapport-building questions and then asked participants to "define or describe" the concepts of interest (i.e., environmentalism, community, and racial or ethnic community in that order). Participants were allowed time to fully respond to each query, and when necessary, asked follow-up questions that encouraged them to expand on or clarify behaviors, values, beliefs, motivations, or roles they associated with each concept. In addition, participants were asked to discuss their personal connections or feelings about the topics, and if they felt it was helpful, to list words that they associated with each concept. In general, these follow-up questions were selected from a standard list of probes, or involved very basic requests ("Can you tell me more about that"; "I'd like to return to something you said earlier"; etc.). Although this portion of the interview was guided by standard scripted queries, it was relatively conversational. The primary goal was to focus participants on the constructs and start them thinking about possible connections between them. Thus, the interviewer attempted to strike a balance between following up on statements that had probative value for understanding participants' ideas about environmentalism and community, while minimizing

tangential discussion of unrelated topics. In addition to questions about the topics under study, the interview included a few questions about participants' experiences using the natural environment (e.g., "How often have you used 'natural outdoor areas' in the last year?" "What do you normally do when using 'natural outdoor areas'?") Combined, these portions of the interview took ~30 min.

*Conceptual content cognitive mapping.* To explore the connections between environmentalism and racial community, we used a qualitative research method known as conceptual content cognitive mapping (3CM) (Austin, 1994; Kearney & Kaplan, 1997). Cognitive maps are hypothesized to be experience-based, internal representations that individuals have about concepts. The maps are unique and reflect networks of cognitive objects that help individuals understand concepts as a set of related topics and ideas rather than as isolated and concrete information. Thus, concepts can vary greatly in abstraction and complexity across individuals.

Cognitive mapping is a type of research method designed to elicit visual representations of these unique internal networks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The 3CM in particular is an idiographic approach that combines a qualitative interview and a card-sorting activity to draw out and organize cognitive content as understood by individual participants. It is especially useful when the research goal, as in the present study, is to elicit representations of abstract and complex ideas because it focuses on existing knowledge while accounting for limitations of working memory. To date, most studies using the 3CM have examined people's understanding of specific, discrete constructs (see Tilt *et al.*, 2007; Van Hulle Vincent 2007; Wells, 2005). Here, we extended this methodology to explore conceptualizations of the connections between concepts.

After describing each of the key concepts in the first phase of the interview, each participant was next asked to, "Think about anything that comes to mind about the connections between your ethnic community and environmental issues. Imagine that you are describing connections to someone who is unfamiliar with your ethnic community and unfamiliar with environmental issues. What, if anything, would you tell this person about possible connections? What things would this person need to know about the relationship between ethnic community and environmental issues?" Participants were instructed to describe as many items (e.g., ideas, definitions, and thoughts) as they could in the form of words, short phrases, and sentences, and each item was written on an index card by the interviewer. Participants were further instructed to arrange these items into meaningful groups and to label the groupings. There were no restrictions on this task. Some participants grouped their items as they generated them, whereas others generated all of their items first and then grouped them later. Participants were allowed to add or remove items at any time, and likewise, they were permitted to alter the labels on their groups. Throughout this procedure, participants were asked to provide feedback and clarification about what they were doing. Some participants included arrows to clarify direction and flow among their groups; other participants provided this same information but did so verbally. When participants had finished sorting their items and groups, and by doing so creating a physical representation of their cognitive map, they were asked to verbally explain their map's structure.

The 3CM phase of the interview took ~45 min to complete. The interview concluded with participants answering a few standard and specific questions about their environmentally relevant attitudes and behaviors (e.g., about their access to and use of recycling, the extent that they valued alternative transportation). Finally, the interviewer debriefed participants, answered their questions, and provided them an opportunity to add information that they felt had been excluded from the questions or their responses, gave them their promised remuneration, and provided contact information in case the participant had follow-up questions.

## Results

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then repeatedly read and discussed by the investigators in an attempt to identify common themes and discussion points about environmentalism, community, and community framed in a racial or ethnic context. Participants' conceptualizations are briefly summarized below, followed by fuller descriptions of the cognitive maps they produced. These maps, the heart of this study, illustrate a variety of perceptual connections between the key concepts. In the interest of maintaining the focus of this article and keeping its overall length manageable, we have provided only a few illustrative direct quotes in the text, but have included more complete examples of participants' responses in tables.

### *Summary of descriptions of individual concepts*

*Environmentalism.* Participants' ideas about environmentalism touched on themes such as activism and social movements, conservation and stewardship, and the esthetic quality of the environment (see Table 2). Responses also reflected normative ideas about how humans should interact with and value the natural world; this theme was reflected in one response, "don't abuse it, and you can kind of use it." Other responses suggested attitudes that reflected environmentalism, for example, being "pro" environmental protection. Some of

**Table 2. Selected Statements Describing Environmentalism**

| |
|---|
| "It could be as simple as nature. It could be about water. It could be about conservation." |
| "I think that environmentalism . . . has connotations of pro or for the environment in its movement in support of social groups or advocacy groups . . . you know conservation organizations." |
| "Just somebody in charge of that, environmentalists, making sure everything is clean. The trash isn't going in the wrong place because it affects everything." |
| "To me it just means treat the environment the way you want to be treated so it can benefit you later on, you know . . . so don't abuse it and you can kind of use it." |

the participants associated environmentalism with "environmentalists." One participant used terms such as "hippie" and "tree-huggerish" to describe people who dedicate their efforts or careers to "outdoorsy stuff," whereas another quipped that she associated environmentalism with "Oregonians." These comments suggested stereotypes, and even stigma, in people's thinking about environmentalism.

Interestingly, most participants did not think of their own eco-friendly beliefs or actions as environmentalism. One participant, for example, mentioned that she spent a good deal of time picking up litter on her daily walks, but also said that she thought of this behavior as social responsibility rather than environmentalism. Another participant thought others might classify her as an environmentalist because of her memberships in environmental organizations and her advocacy for the preservation of certain parks and wild lands. However, because she was motivated by her interests in hiking and trail running, she reported that such labeling was inaccurate, and seemed to consider herself to be more of an advocate for outdoor recreation opportunities than environmentalism *per se*.

*Community.* Participants thought about community in a number of ways, with their conceptions apparently changing with context (see Table 3). Some participants thought about community in terms of neighborhood boundaries or local institutions, whereas others considered it in terms of shared interests and experiences. In fact, almost all of the participants claimed to have some idea of communities formed around shared values or experiences rather than geography, even if this was not their primary conception. Some participants discussed connections to particular social groups. Others mentioned that community could be framed by networks of social support, and still others talked about patterns of action such as activism or being involved in community affairs. A common thread across these descriptions seemed to be a perception of community as a social unit that binds people together.

*Racial community.* Most of the participants reported that racial communities were not necessarily major organizing forces in their lives. However, they did acknowledge and identify with specific ethnicities, such as the Korean- or Mexican-American communities (see Table 1), and, in the interview, they were encouraged to speak from the heritage they felt most closely connected to. When describing their ethnic communities, participants tended to describe values and feelings, focusing on ideas like being "family-oriented," or having a way to promote education. Relative to the other participants, the two white participants seemed to have greater difficulty conceptualizing an ethnic community of which they were members. John, for example, implied that thinking in terms of the "White Community" was awkward and even evoked thoughts of racism. He

**Table 3. Selected Statements Describing Community**

| |
|---|
| ". . . what defines a community is when people work together." |
| ". . . a defined geographic scope relative to where I reside." |
| ". . . usually it means a group of people who even if they don't know each other have some common interests." |
| ". . . is just a small phone network or family network, religious network. It's people that are always tightly knit, always bound by whatever brought them together . . . ." |
| ". . . my immediate circle of friends or the neighbors or someone who has a common cause or a common thread or a common concern." |

suggested that thinking in terms of a "European Community" would be more apt, but ultimately did not seem to identify with such a label. Meanwhile, Shirley claimed that she had not really developed a cultural identity because she did not have much experience interacting with members of other racial or ethnic groups.

It also was clear that each participant's ideas were unique, and likely had been affected and shaped by their different experiences and interactions. Rather than trying to summarize or distill an understanding of the key concepts as a function of particular group membership or identification, the goal of this research was to offer a window onto people's unique and likely highly variable conceptualizations. The 3CM highlighted distinct perspectives and a wide array of thinking about the connections between the key concepts.

### *Conceptual content cognitive mapping*

In light of our small and purposive sample, we did not aim to statistically compare items or maps across participants or participant groups.[4] Rather, consistent with our phenomenological approach, we sought meaning and understanding based on the content and structure of the maps created by participants as well as their verbal feedback about them. That is, we focused on the mapping process in addition to the individual maps as products.

The participants approached the mapping task differently. Some expended considerable effort developing the physical properties of their maps, whereas others seemed to treat the task more as a brainstorming procedure that they used to enhance their verbal explanations. The participants' maps are described below in terms of their structure, content, and the comments provided about them.

*Organization of cognitive content.* As shown in Table 1, the number of items generated about the connections between concepts ranged from 15 to 32, and the number of groups in the maps ranged from 2 to 8. Examination of the structural composition of the maps suggested different dimensions or characterizations that, for the purposes of organization and ease of presentation, we label as comparison, hierarchy, and processes. Comparisons were maps that contrasted changing or different types of community values. Hierarchies divided larger, higher-level concepts into smaller and lower-level components, and also revealed how components were nested within each other. Maps that emphasized processes organized conceptual components in terms of what led to or was affected by environmentalism at individual or community levels. These maps included bottom-up processes that shaped environmentalism, and linear processes that outlined steps or conditions that led to various forms of environmentalism. In addition to these relatively straightforward process structures, one map detailed a considerably more complex process that included multidirectional influences and multiple outcomes. These labels were selected for purposes of exposition only. We make no claims about them as endemic to the 3CM methodology or even as generalizable to the connections between concepts in this study.

*Doris.* Doris' cognitive map of the connections between the Asian community and environmentalism compared two groups, *traditional Asian views* about the outdoors and more Westernized, *assimilated Asian views* (see Fig. 1). These groups were organized under another group that Doris labeled *global observational and descriptive comments about traditional versus assimilated Asian views*. This higher-order group included items supporting or clarifying her comparison (e.g., assimilated Asian views derived from Western culture). It also included items expressing her concerns about perpetuating negative stereotypes of Asian culture alongside beliefs that stereotypes contain some elements of truth and should not necessarily be overlooked.

Doris observed that the traditional and assimilated Asian value-sets were polarized and likely affected whether and how individuals in the Asian community were environmentally concerned and active. She indicated, for example, that being outdoors was traditionally associated with agriculture, labor, and lower classes, and was seen as undesirable. In terms of assimilated ideals, however, Doris included items suggesting that outdoor recreation was part of a cool and desirable lifestyle, and she supported her ideas with comments like, "It's health and image, I think. [In] American culture now, it's very positive to be a fit, healthy-looking person versus just a thin person." She emphasized such image-based motivations for environmentalism.

Doris suggested that, because of these different value sets, environmentalism was not likely to be learned in households headed by first-generation Asian-Americans who had not been "Westernized." Rather, she felt such values were learned through popular culture and media, and through the influence of friends and same-generation family members (e.g., cousins).

*Paul.* Paul's cognitive map also focused on comparison. It compared the groups *the way the community was changing* and the *negative*

[4] 3CM studies commonly employ analytic techniques that involve coding and grouping response items, including quantitative comparisons between groups (see, e.g., Van Hulle Vincent, 2007, for a study on pain management, but also examples involving maps of forest management and comparisons between National Forest Service personnel, timber workers, and members of environmental groups, Kearney & Bradley, 1998; Kearney *et al.*, 1999).

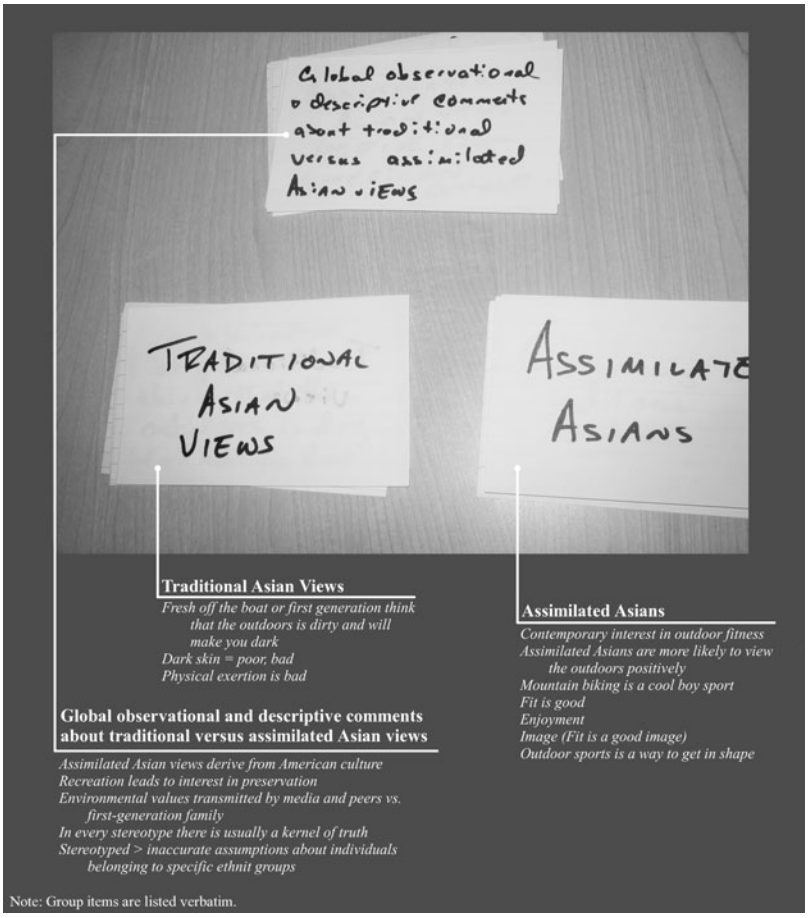


**Fig. 1.** Photograph of Doris' conceptual content cognitive map and subsumed group items.

*aspects of community* that prevented behaviors consistent with his ideas about environmentalism. In this way, like Doris, he also contrasted traditional and modern values in the Asian community, including describing them as a "clash." Paul provided reasons why both the traditional and modern factions of the Asian community did not seem to value environmentalism. For the traditional faction, his map items and feedback indicated that environmentalism was not as important as family prominence, and was also viewed superstitiously. For the more modern part of the Asian community, Paul reported that "if they are interested in the environment, I think it [is] because it's the cool thing to do more so than it's the right thing to do." Rather, a drive for materialism and image prevented environmentalism. Paul described these values as shortsighted, derived from Western values, and culturally ruinous. He suggested that the problem was magnified in the Korean community specifically because of its size. "We're a smaller country," said Paul.[5] "We have to make something better . . . . We have to be more successful. Everything has

[5]Paul often used the term "country" and "community" interchangeably. He explained that he felt the Korean community was so small and tightly knit that it could not be limited to Americans.

to be more excessive because we're a smaller country to compete with the larger countries."

Paul's comments reflected ideas of pride and aspiration as limiting environmentalism in his (Korean-American) community. Although he ultimately suggested that the positive or negative aspects of pride depended on the individual, he included it as a mediator between the ways his community was changing and the negative aspects of the community. Thus, Paul's map revealed pessimism about his community's ability to embrace environmentalism, but also included the individual as a potentially positive force for environmentalism.

*George.* George's map focused on processes, illustrating a bottom-up process that organized factors that provided foundation for or affected environmental values and behaviors. It included four groups that he labeled *education, Internet, government programs,* and *old school community organizing,* all of which reflected different ways of disseminating information and awareness about environmental issues in the Black community, particularly among urban youth. Examples of items in these groups included schools and community centers, media, online networking, word of mouth, direct exposure to environmental issues, government-sponsored recycling programs, and returning recyclables for deposits.

George explained that youth and urban lifestyles were central to both the Black community and environmentalism, and thus indirectly but intimately connected them. He stated that the different ways information was dispersed shaped cultural values and development. George stated that because environmental issues were more prominent than ever before, he thought that they could "trickle in" to the beliefs, values, and behaviors of urban Black communities over time.

George also observed that activism was an important mode of spreading awareness of social issues, one that was already utilized and valued in Black communities. However, he suggested that environmentalism was not particularly salient as an activist topic because no one had made the effort to make it so. Community members engaged in behaviors like recycling and conserving water because of what they had learned from the media and other outlets, but from George's perspective, they had not been encouraged to take leadership on environmental issues, or to contextualize or link these issues specifically to the African-American community. In his map and in his verbal description, George repeatedly referred to the black community as a "blank slate" for environmental interest and an "untapped market."

*Josephine.* The underlying assumption in Josephine's cognitive map seemed to be that outdoor education and recreation would foster awareness and interest in environmentalism. Her map was comprised of two hierarchically structured sets of groups (see Fig. 2). One, titled *accessibility,* included groups labeled *community* and *wealth.* Community, in this case, reflected ease of access, and she suggested that having outdoor opportunities nearby made them appealing and convenient tools for education and experience. "Can you drive up the street and go hiking in a beautiful park . . . or do you have to actually go much further, and now it's a chore?" asked Josephine in example. The wealth cluster included socioeconomic considerations in the Black community that Josephine saw as relevant to engaging in outdoor recreation such as "time off," "vacation and retreats," and "gear."

The second higher-order group was labeled *individual choice,* and included items related to making environmentalism a priority and self-initiating environmental activity that could include members of other groups. Josephine noted a number of considerations that affected individual choice, and incorporated them under this structure. One, labeled *education,* included ideas that people need to be educated about and exposed to environmental issues to value and respect human connections to the Earth. *Comfort/leisure* contained her observations that it is important to feel safe and relaxed when visiting outdoor areas to enjoy the experiences and enhance their educational quality. In a complementary fashion, the third group, labeled *racism,* suggested that prejudice hinders outdoor engagement, and particularly for members of the black community in locations with a history of racial segregation. Adopting an optimistic frame, Josephine suggested that it was possible to overcome such feelings of discomfort and not to get discouraged by the beliefs or actions of others. She noted that one way to surmount these barriers and potentially to motivate outdoor recreation in general was through organized church and school outings, or by arranging visits to the outdoors by racially mixed groups.

*Judy.* Judy's map could be labeled as emphasizing processes. Specifically, her bottom-up process map focused on *action words* (e.g., "respect for the area," "being open-minded," and "don't stereotype") and *labeling* (a broad group that included items like "educating," "observant," and "supportive") that in combination led to the creation of an ecologically open-minded, motivated, caring, and friendly Latino community. Judy's map focused on environmentalism as a concern for the "area," or the physical places comprising and utilized by the community.

Judy's map and comments also suggested that encouraging environmentalism in her community would require communication and resourcefulness in an atmosphere of caring and support. She

went on to connect these ideas to education: "Once [community members] are educated, [they're] more likely to have respect for the community. And once they have the respect for the community, they'll respect the area. Once they respect the area, how can we take care of the area? We have to be resourceful!" Judy also identified what she perceived to be particular strengths of the Latino community, such as friendliness, caring, and related features that she felt promoted environmental interest and action.

*Katherine.* Like Judy, Katherine focused on attitudes and orientations associated with being environmentally friendly in her (Mexican-American) community. Her map focused on processes, conveying a linear process that began with a group called *beliefs* (e.g., "we are all connected" and "family is like a community"), which led to *things that I do* (e.g., "giving," "cleaning," and "loving"). Next came her perceptions and interactions with her *community* (e.g., "sharing positivity" and "support"), which led to *outcomes* that benefited the community and the environment (e.g., "caring for where I live," "happiness," "maintaining relationships with others," and "give a good example"). Further, these outcomes influenced a set of personal *feelings* and self-views that enhanced environmentalism (e.g., "being a good person overall," "being eco-friendly," and "helping others").

By overlapping environmentalism with concepts related to helping others and caring for her community, Katherine's map reflected ideas about environmental activity as a form of social responsibility that affected all members of the community, rather than environmentalism as a unique and isolated construct. In fact, Katherine's map began and ended with the self; interacting and affecting the community was part of the process described by her map and not the end result. Perhaps related to this observation, Katherine's understanding of and connection to the environment had a notably spiritual quality. She emphasized that her map was contextualized in a set of beliefs about god and prayer.

*Shirley.* Shirley, a relatively young white woman, also produced a linear process map. In this case, her map began with the group *abstract values that lead to action* (e.g., "activism" and "democratic") and progressed through a group labeled *advertising* (e.g., "community newspapers" and "emailing and Yahoo!™ Groups," [trademark symbol added]). Advertising, according to Shirley, increased awareness of issues and activities in her community and led to a

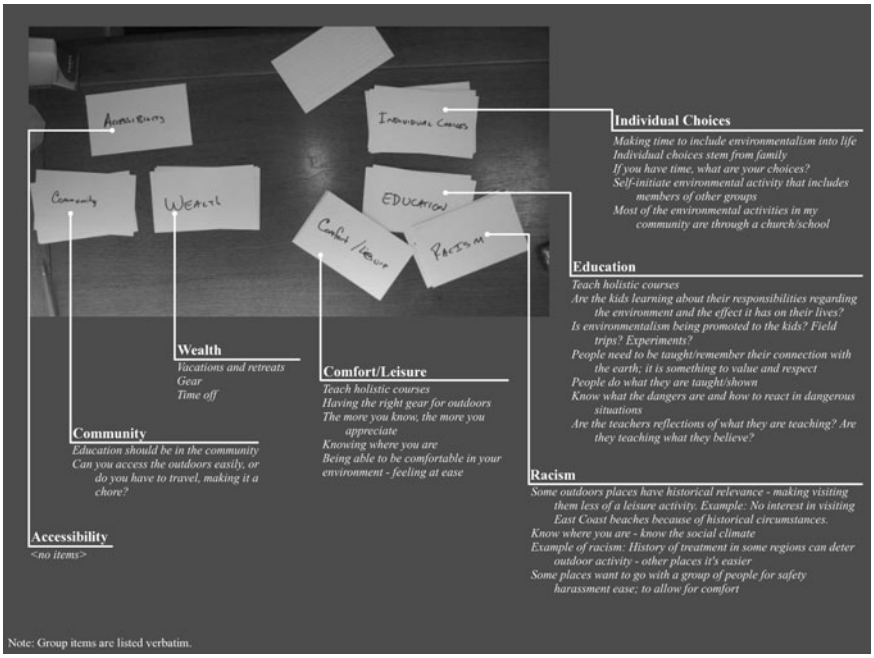


**Fig. 2.** Photograph of Josephine's conceptual content cognitive map and subsumed group items.

group called *things that you would physically do with your community that also relate to the environment* that included activities in which community members interacted and raised awareness about environmental issues (e.g., "community committees," "community barbeques," and "religious holidays"). These activities led to *actions that can be increased through awareness* (e.g., "recycling," "air conditioning improvements/efficiency," and "voting for environmentally favorable policies") that also subsequently affected use or reliance on environmentally friendly *consumer products* (e.g., "hybrid cars" and "solar panels"). In Shirley's map, environmentally friendly actions and consumer choices were connected directly, but were also influenced by a cluster called *any other renewable energy source* (e.g., "wind energy"), suggesting that accessible green infrastructure could also affect community members' choices and priorities.

A distinctive feature of Shirley's map was that while environmentalism ultimately involved personal choice, the community was responsible for making such choices possible (e.g., through committee action), and individuals were seen as responsible for contributing to the community. Essentially, then, her map articulated antecedents and consequences of a community-based process. As Shirley explained, eco-friendly beliefs and behaviors were seen to develop naturally: "[Being part of the community] kind of increases the awareness of those issues, and people adopt all those ideas about environmentalism, and then they end up doing these things."

When asked to describe how her cognitive map reflected her racial or ethnic community, Shirley reported that she was unsure. For her, heritage (rather than ethnic membership *per se*) served to strengthen community identification and values. She suggested that forms of community engagement might differ between cultural groups, but that they would nonetheless serve similar functions and likely produce related outcomes.

*John.* The other white participant, John, determined that the most reasonable approximation of his racial community involved the "political class," and included those holding the most responsibility for issues of agriculture, industry, and other economic forces. His general perspective was that in a system dominated by desires to consume and expand, Americans were especially motivated by a "worship of convenience" and a sense of entitlement. "We're so used to saying, 'I just like that stuff, and I don't care what happens as long as I get some.' And I think it's kind of an ethnic attitude. [It's] really

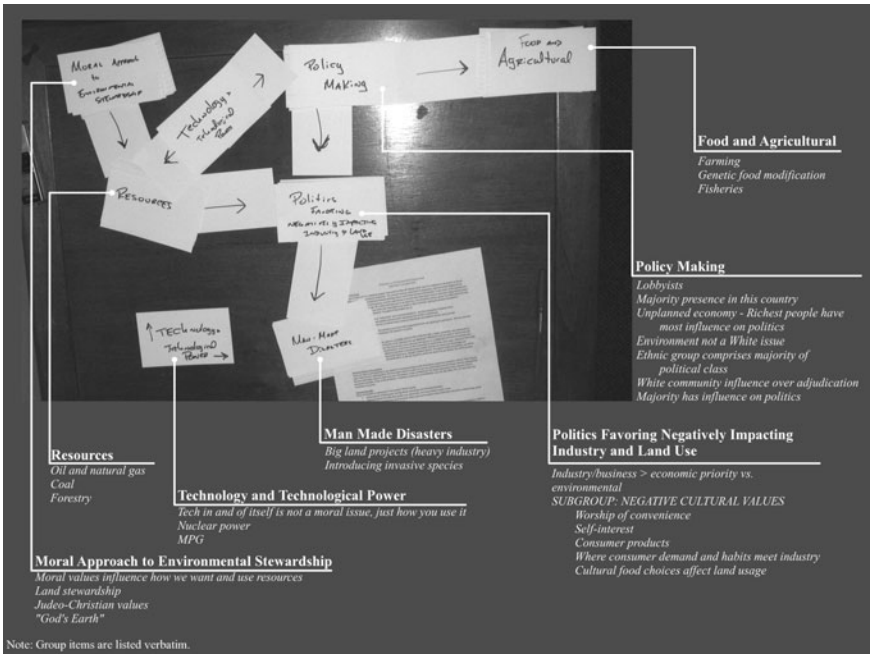


**Fig. 3.** Photograph of John's conceptual content cognitive map and subsumed group items.

American," said John. He felt that those with the most power exploited such values. The interconnection between power, desire, and values formed the basis of his process-focused map.

In fact, John described a complex process (see Fig. 3) that started with a group called *the moral approach to environmental stewardship* (e.g., "Judeo-Christian values" and ideas about "God's earth"), and progressed through a number of interconnected groups that illustrated how morality and values were used to rationalize and propagate environmental degradation, rather than stewardship, through political, economic, and industrial prowess. These groups included *resources* (e.g., "oil and natural gas," "coal," and "forestry"), duplicate groups called *technology and technological power* that focused on the use or misuse of technology to exploit resources, and a group labeled *policy making* that included self-interested politics and policies (e.g., "lobbyists," "Unplanned economy—Richest people have the most influence on politics," and "Ethnic group comprises majority of political class"). There was also a cluster labeled *politics favoring negatively impacting industry and land use,* which reiterated ideas that political priorities favor economic growth at the expense of environmental preservation and protection. Combined, the processes described in John's map led to negative ecological outcomes reflected in the groups *food and agricultural* practices (e.g., "genetic food modification") and *man made disasters* [e.g., "introducing invasive species" and "big land projects (heavy industry)"]. In short, John's map summarized a self-perpetuating, environmentally destructive political process justified through morals and values. He suggested that although morals were generally positive facets of society, they were too often used as persuasive tools to disregard or justify the degradation of environmental quality.

## Discussion

As seen in the individual maps, then, participants described a variety of different connections between environmentalism and their ethnic communities. Some participants focused on resources available in their ethnic community to encourage or spread environmentalism. Others focused on the steps required for achieving environmental awareness, and still others focused on barriers to environmentalism endemic to their communities. Some thought about values and traditions, and still others framed their ideas in terms of attitudes, emotions, and specific beliefs and experiences.

The 3CM proved its utility and allowed us to collect a set of observations that would have been elusive using other methods, and generally highlighted the benefit of examining connections between the key concepts. Consistent with the goals of better understanding potential pathways to environmental engagement and concern, the approach provided insight about environmentalism and racial or ethnic communities, including how the connections between these concepts contribute to unique perceptions of environmental issues.

### *The influence of culture*

Clearly, ethnicity and environmentalism can be and often are intertwined. As a matter of social justice, for example, some racial groups are disproportionately affected by adverse environmental conditions resulting from human pollution (e.g., Jones & Rainey, 2006). Due to unique experiences with environmental problems, as well as differing conceptualizations of environmental issues (as suggested by this research), it may be useful to focus on ethnicity or other cultural factors in designing interventions to change environmental attitudes or behaviors.

We hasten to point out, however, that while the participants in this study were able to conceptualize and discuss the connections between environmentalism and their cultural communities, race and ethnicity did not seem to be a natural or critical focus for many of their ideas. In other words, it did not seem to be a lens through which they readily thought about environmental issues. Some participants seemed quite enthusiastic about the opportunity to speak from their cultural viewpoint, but others worried about perpetuating stereotypes or denigrating their communities, which seemed to make them reluctant to stress connections between ethnicity and environmentalism. Almost all of the participants suggested that alternative foci might be more appropriate in framing environmental issues, and that the connections between environmentalism and their ethnic community were not intuitively apparent.

Despite these sentiments, which also may reflect social conventions to not call attention to racial differences or to avoid narrowly construed race-based explanations for social behaviors, and especially in a face-to-face interview context, the participants in this research generally seemed to embrace the 3CM task. As they became involved in the procedure of developing their map, they came to recognize potential benefits of using ethnicity as a tangible referent for community. This is an important conceptual and methodological insight for future research on community, ethnicity, and environmental action. It also suggests how the 3CM might be useful in circumventing social desirability barriers that might obscure potentially important components or connections between concepts.

### *Environmentalism or social responsibility?*

All of the participants were aware of environmental issues, concerned about environmental quality, and reported being cognizant of

their impact on the environment. They also easily conceptualized and described environmentalism. Interestingly, however, participants rarely associated their own actions with environmentalism. As suggested both by their descriptions of environmentalism as a discrete concept and by their cognitive maps, their own ecologically minded activity was connected to ideas of being socially responsible, or of maintaining human quality of life rather than environmental protection *per se*. These observations highlight the fact that while environmentalism may be a readily available and utilized term, and especially in public discourse, it does not necessarily reflect environmentally focused motivations. Further, environmentally friendly behavior may flow from any one of a range of social motivations, some of which may be tied to cultural or ethnic values and traditions.

Returning to our social issues framework for understanding environmental problems, this recognition potentially has important implications for designing social programming to influence environmental attitudes and behaviors, research to understand the connections of identity (e.g., ecological or social) to environmental concern, as well as a number of other topics. Not all people will be moved to action by appeals to environmental stewardship or conservation, or even by making environmental identities or communities salient as a guide for behavior. Instead, it may be more effective to focus on other (potentially "non-environmental") motivations, attitudes, and identities, including those tied to ethnic or racial communities, in attempting to influence behavior that has environmental impact. This reasoning is consistent with other approaches that emphasize a broader range of motivations (e.g., altruism) as important components of environmental concern and subsequent action (e.g., Schultz, 2001).

As suggested by some of the participants' responses in this research, it also may be useful to further consider possible stigma associated with environmentalism, both in terms of behaviors and as a label (i.e., "environmentalist"), to better understand resistance to environmentally friendly behaviors. This stigma appeared in the descriptions of more than one participant. It is easy to imagine how it could function as a barrier, preventing people from adapting their lifestyles so as to be framed by environmental concern rather than drives for material wealth, including those described by deep-ecology (Winter & Koger, 2004).

### *The influence of community*

The participants in this research readily recognized that the concept of community was versatile and could be applied to their racial or ethnic group, but also to a variety of other geographic and special interest groupings. A few articulated understanding of community as a process. That is, they thought about it less as a set of extant characteristics and more as patterns of action, including contributing to a community through activism. Indeed, Katherine and Shirley's cognitive maps suggested ideas of community process and engagement. Katherine's map included issues of the self as both antecedent and consequence of community engagement, whereas Shirley's map began with value-based antecedents leading to community engagement, which led to subsequent behavioral consequences. These observations reinforce the idea that people can view community from multiple perspectives, and that different definitions and understandings of community may be differentially effective as potential forces for creating environmental concern and change.

### *Limitations and future directions*

Although we believe that our results are suggestive conceptually and in terms of avenues for future research, they are not without limitation. The small and purposive sample, for example, was chosen based on practical considerations and because of the preliminary nature of this research. In focusing on specific case examples and idiographic conceptualizations and maps, however, we departed from other research that has utilized the 3CM methodology and that has sought to analyze data at a broader level and to make comparisons between the components and structure of maps within and between specific groups (e.g., Kearney & Bradley, 1998; Wells, 2005). We value this flexibility of the 3CM, but recognize that larger-scale future research using this approach may be advantaged by, and would certainly permit, alternative (and quantitative) data analytical approaches.

Our small sample also precluded conclusions about both between- and within-group ethnic variation. Given our interests in community-based social action, and potential pathways tied to communities, we opted to explore one type of community definition that is salient in American society. As partially revealed in our results, people do understand and connect to communities organized around ethnic group memberships and connections. At the same time, and as a potential topic for future research, there are a number of other possible community referents (e.g., political ideology, gender, and place of residence) that may be relevant to environmental and other social action. One benefit of focusing participants on ethnic communities and connections was that it highlighted their individuality, thereby providing them with a unique (and apparently novel) perspective from which to think about environmental issues. Our results suggest that there may be great value in conducting additional research on the connections between

ethnic community membership and environmentalism. However, it is likely important in this future work to pay attention to issues not just of simple ethnic group membership, but also of acculturation, degree of ethnic identification, place of residence (e.g., ethnic enclaves), and so on, and particularly to those interested in the multicultural aspects of community and social action. These topics go well beyond the scope and intent of the current work. Our interest here was in the descriptions and interconnections between the broad concepts of community, ethnic community, and environmentalism, rather than in an attempt to systematically assess either between- or even within-group variation for different ethnic communities.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our results are evocative, and may offer potentially valuable insight for future explorations of social and environmental action linked to community. As one example, future research could place greater emphasis on exploring how multiple social influences, such as community, ethnicity, or a number of others (e.g., identification with nature), operate in concert to affect people's perceptions about and impact on the natural environment. Moreover, exploring social issues through procedures such as the 3CM offers insight into personal views and frames with concomitant less attachment to investigators' or experts' predeterminations of categories or perspectives. The participants in this research described relationships between the key concepts, or lack thereof, and we found the contents and variation in these perceptions to be meaningful and not wholly predictable from existing literature. Thus, it may be worthwhile to attend to variation in understanding and even the core conceptual nature of social issues (including environmental quality) in attempts to better understand forces that promote or preclude social action.

## Conclusion

Understanding various pathways to environmental caring and concern are essential to moving toward a sustainable future. In recognizing environmental quality as a social issue, it is important to explore the ways that people perceive and think about environmental issues. The cognitive maps obtained in this study offer evidence of some of the ways that diverse people think about environmentalism and community and also integrate such ideas into their lives. By examining cognitive links between the concepts, the findings in this study illustrated that people's ideas about environmental issues are complex and interconnected with many aspects of their lives. As well as providing information that might be useful for promoting environmental action, the results of this study extend understanding of social action and social issues as broader frameworks. As such, it might serve as a foundation for research or programs aimed at promoting different forms of social action among diverse people. The texture of community, and its many psychological connections, is complex, and an understanding of its potential impact on social and environmental action is essential for tailoring effective engagement strategies in a diverse society.

## Acknowledgments

This research was partially supported by funding from the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station, and the Fletcher Jones Foundation. Portions of this research were presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Las Vegas, NV, January 2010, the annual meeting of the Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences, Portland, OR, June 2010, and the bi-annual convention of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, New Orleans, LA, July 2010. We thank Amber Gaffney, Rupu Gupta, and Erin O'Brien for their contributions to this research, and also extend our thanks to Anne R. Kearney and Diane E. Austin for information on the 3CM. Finally, we thank the people who took part in this research for their time, insights, and candor in participating.

## Author Disclosure Statement

Patricia L. Winter sits on the editorial board of the journal *Ecopsychology*. No other conflicts of interest or competing financial conflicts exist.

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Received: September 21, 2010
Accepted: January 24, 2011