Do we need personalization more than normalization?

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Normalisation is a common strategy that emphasises specific (usually familiar) features of a situation or category over other features that are seen as problematic. Typically, the process involves at least three components:

- Showing how the problematic scenario actually has similarities with different, more positively perceived situations.
- Emphasising the ordinariness of the problematic scenario.
- Highlighting compensations for any perceived deficits or problems that have not been dealt with by the components above.

In the case of environmental crises, normalization is viewed as a better alternative to the doom and gloom approach of more threatening, apocalyptic-if-we-don't-act approaches. By focusing on the positive and the familiar, it acts to engage people, encouraging them to approach the problem rather than avoid it, and perhaps even see the situation as a challenge that can bring about benefits (e.g., the financial and employment benefits of a "green", low-carbon economy). While this approach does have many advantages, and is certainly preferable to the fear-avoidance and cognitively-dissonant responses often seen with the overly-apocalyptic approaches used in the past, there are still some concerns that I think need to be addressed.

One normalizing approach is to frame environmental issues simply as problems that need solutions. Whatever the issue, it is seen as a problem when it in some way affects humans, whether those humans are nature-lovers, conservationists, or exploiters of natural resources. This way of thinking can be comforting as it implies that there is a solution, yet to normalize it, the issue must be understood within a mainstream or otherwise dominant paradigm. If, as many think, the problem is actually with the paradigms themselves, then there can never be a "solution" as this approach does nothing to challenge the underlying assumptions of that paradigm. To emphasise the familiar, normalization also tends to mean that patterns of human social structure are imposed onto the environment: ecosystems need to be "managed" or "stewarded" in the same way we might run a business, the implication being that humans, as the dominant, superior, top-of-the-hierarchy species, have not only the power but also the knowledge and moral right to do so.

Take the example of sustainability. The most commonly used definition – "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" – comes from the Bruntland report (WCED, 1987), where sustainability is framed as a relatively simple problem of intergenerational equity. As a normalization strategy, this follows the aforementioned pattern. It suggests that future generation needs will be comparable to present needs, implying that the future won't be so different from how things are now and so affirming that we don't really need to change that much. It further serves to distance us from present participation

in issues of environmental change: as it is *future* generations who will be compromised, then any problems that do exist in the present must therefore have been caused by past generations. We are free from any responsibility for current issues (and the sustainability definition implies that the needs of the present can, or perhaps already are, being met) and have been reassured that the future isn't something to worry about too much!

Even the term "sustainability" is itself reassuring, as it is the current world, the dominant, Western way of thinking which is to be sustained. It is fundamentally anthropocentric: the "needs of the present" refers to *human* needs, and "future generations" means *human* descendants. Moreover, the Bruntland report explicitly avoids a problematization of current economic models by pre-emptively defining economic growth as "an essential prerequisite for eradication of poverty and for enhancing the resource base on which present and future generations depend". This has subsequently led on to the oxymoron of *sustainable development*, essentially green-washing business-as-usual, as the term "sustainable" also says nothing about *ecological* sustainability as this would require a recognition that there are limits to the ecosystems of which humanity is just a part. As Rees (1990, p. 1) points out, use of the term sustainability "is no longer a challenge to the conventional economic paradigm but rather has become another excuse for continued economic growth. True sustainability demands a radically different economics which fully recognizes the processes and limits of the biosphere".

A further concern with framing any issue as a problem to be solved is that it is fundamentally dichotomous, encouraging a separation between the problem-solver and the situation. Vaillancourt (1995) describes how this approach led to environmental sociology reframing environmental issues as problems of public health (e.g., pollution as pathogen) and security (e.g., the threat of unfriendly energy-producing countries); an "us versus them" narrative that neatly replaced the Cold War nuclear threat in the public mind, but an ineffective strategy for actually mitigating the problems.

Us vs Them

This narrative – one of disconnection and separation – is widespread. Most of the approaches used to normalize environmental issues are based on the notion that humans are separate from, perhaps even beyond, nature. Catton and Dunlap (1978; Dunlap & Catton, 1979) called this dominant Western worldview the *Human Exemptionalism Paradigm* (HEP). Along with a fundamental separation between humans and the rest of the natural world (especially the animal world, as culture is a uniquely human quality that is more variable and able to change more rapidly than purely biological traits), the HEP argues that:

- humans have freedom of choice subject only to social and cultural factors.
- the social and cultural environment is discrete from biophysical considerations.
- human ingenuity and problem-solving shows a cumulative progression that can continue to expand *ad infinitum* (and note that again we see this "problem-solution" framing).

This argument emphasises the idea that humans are special, somehow beyond nature with that extra something (mind/soul/divine spark!) that sets us apart from everything else in the natural world. Perhaps inevitably, the "us versus them" framing also brings to mind to the most obvious human confrontational metaphor: war.

The war on...

Framing a situation or a cause as a war has a long history. Most recently we have the ongoing wars on crime (a phrase coined by the FBI in the 1930s), on poverty (from US President Johnson in 1964), on drugs and cancer (Nixon in 1971), on Christmas (journalist Peter Brimelow highlighting politically-correct secularism in 1999), and the well-known war on Terror(ism) (George W. Bush in 2001). In a parody of this last "war", environmental protesters used the phrase "the War on Terra" to describe George Bush's environmental policies. The term then became more widespread after it was used by political satirist Jon Stewart in 2005. In a segment entitled "Man vs. Planet: The War on Terra", he characterized the Bush administration as arguing that "the ice caps are not melting; rather, the water has been liberated".

Unfortunately, the comedic nature of the phrase has since been lost, and (possibly as the general populace was confused by a Latin pun, even a Google search now treating "terra" as a misspelling of "terror") it has been dumbed down to a more general framing of a war between humans and nature, perceived as being initiated by the opposite side to which the perceiver identifies with. At best, we are told we need to "confront" climate change (United Nations, 2010, p. 1). At worst it's an all out battle that humans need to win. Recently, this war has become so "normal" that we see adverts and articles that speak of the "war on weeds", one even going so far as to personify the weeds as "evil" entities who are intentionally trying to not only spoil the human-made "perfection" of the bowling-green lawn (surely the epitome of human-controlled nature) but also terrorize people in their home (Visit4Ads, 2011).

Another common result of war is the domination and/or assimilation of the defeated. Although arguably a more enlightened approach than the notion of passive, natural resources that exist merely to be exploited, our "managed" environments (because we humans know what's best) have been extended to a whole industry of "ecosystem services". The non-human is still characterised as a natural resource (akin to when the work-force became 'human resources') to be utilised as needed, but we now acknowledge that non-human systems, both biotic and abiotic, do have specific needs that we must allow for if we are to continue to benefit from them. Yet we quantify this by assigning a value based on how much it would cost for us to replace them with human effort e.g., in reports of the decline of bee populations, it has been calculated that their loss as pollinators would cost the UK economy "up to £440 million" (Moskvitch, 2010). While this is a nod in the direction of a more systemic, ecocentric view, anthropocentrism and exemptionalism are maintained and any implication of non-human personhood is avoided. To me, rather than a step forward, it hearkens back to other all-too-familiar concepts: servitude and slavery.

Making it personal

While I agree that normalizaztion is a better approach than fear-based or coercive approaches, I think there is a different way of framing the issues that still maintains the engagement of familiarity: seeing it as a *personal* issue. Rather than trying to involve people in something which is seen as external to them, often presented as an issue which is overly abstract or tied up with authoritarian and financial power struggles, we can help people to realise that they are not separate from these issues; that we can see "the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum" (Roszak, 1992, p. 14). We can do this by offering a view that the properties which allow individuals to be physically and mentally healthy – awareness of being part of and reliant on the web of life, being

immersed in natural patterns and rhythms in our everyday lives, and having reciprocal relationships with other beings, human or otherwise – are the same ones which are associated with a healthy ecosystem on local and global scales. That is, human wellbeing can be seen as an emergent property of a healthy ecosystem, where we can no more stand back and passively observe the plight of the non-human natural world than we can fight against it.

Most of the pro-environmental effort is based on changing attitudes, beliefs and values (often based in the psychological *Theory of Planned Behaviour* that sees all behaviour as a combination of a conscious intention balanced by perceptions of difficulty and risk. Very little is based on this idea that we are an integral part of the system that is in crises. To rectify this, I suggest a different frame that could be useful when talking about environmental issues

Embedment

My concept of *embedment* (Stevens, 2010) is an extension of embodiment – the recognition that our behaviours, motivations, thoughts and feelings are both generated and constrained by our physical nature – to include the environment those bodies are embedded in. Embodiment can serve to reify the notion of a world of individuals: isolated, separated bodies passing through an external environment in much the same way as actors play out their roles against a painted backdrop. Ecopsychology, with its roots in systems theory and deep ecology, suggests a different view: the environment is not a scene through which we move but the medium within which we are embedded. It tells us we are an integral part of the place we are in: both historically and on a moment-by-moment basies, that place shapes us, connects us, guides and constrains us. As embodied beings, we can only fully understand who we are by having an awareness of our physical nature; as embedded beings, self-understanding can only come if we are equally aware of our physical environment. When we realize that our inclusion in an environment is an essential part or characteristic of our selves, then *who* we are becomes intimately connected to *where* we are.

Such an approach would need to make use of (co)evolutionary approaches, emphasising human interdependence with the rest of the natural world, and avoiding abstract arguments like how much it would cost *if* it were possible to replace ecosystem services. I think we should focus more on comparative similarities between species, rather than trying to shore up the dam of differences that keeps humans separated from all the other life we co-evolved with. We need to learn to appreciate that, while humans are amazingly complex organisms with unique qualities, other species have their own, unique qualities that are just as amazing. An intellectual fear of anthropomorphism should not be used to bolster anthropocentrism and exemptionalism, or to deny our perceptions and experiences of non-human personhood.

We might then also realise that our emotional responses are not something we can set aside or which need to be validated by ideological arguments – they can be innate responses to places and situations that represent a meaningful, evolved mean of communication between us and our environment. We can reintegrate the role of direct (emotional, reflective) experience in all our approaches rather than putting all the emphasis on "objective" arguments and risk calculations. For example, psychology studies have shown that early childhood experience of natural settings and outdoor recreation that relies on specific natural features (e.g., white water rafting) are the strongest predictors of subsequent pro-environmental behaviour (e.g., Kals, Schumacher & Montada, 1999). Rather than changing people's motivation by bombarding them with information and so-called

rational arguments, there are also inherent motivations, intentions and behaviours that we can focus on.

One specific example from my own research found that people respond to a specific visual quality of any scene: the *fractal dimension* of the skyline. Essentially, this is a measure that quantifies the self-similarity of a shape at different scales (think of a fern leaf, where the overall shape of the plant is similar to the structure of the frond, with the same shape repeated in the leaflets). The more self-similar the higher the fractal dimension) the skyline was, the more relaxed the perceiver's body became and the more they liked the pictured scene. What was particularly interesting was that the fractal dimension also related to the ecological health (specifically, the biodiversity) of the area in which the image was photographed. This suggests that we are looking at an evolved response to healthy ecosystems wherein a lowered physiological arousal is experienced as a positive emotional state and expressed as a preference. Simply put, it shows that the environments which we innately like are those which help restore our wellbeing through virtue of themselves being healthy, functioning ecosystems.

As well as direct practical applications (e.g., demonstrating wellbeing benefits from spending time in natural settings, or improving internal spaces by incorporating natural materials and imagery), we can use these ideas to reframe sustainability, defining it in terms of an ecosystem, within which we humans are embedded, which is able to maintain its processes, functions, and biological diversity in the long term (i.e., an"ecological wellbeing"). While there can still be a focus on specifically human concerns and activity, the emphasis would be on those human interactions with the environment that allow essential ecological states to be maintained. Sustainability, rather than being a poorly-defined, separate issue from wellbeing, might then arise almost as a side-effect of our understandable concern with our own wellbeing: an emergent property of a viably functioning ecosystem of which humans are just one part.

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