"Under-Participation" and Ethnocentrism in Environmental Education Research: Developing "Culturally Sensitive Research Approaches"

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Abstract

Racial and cultural diversity issues have been a source of some interest amongst outdoor and environmental educators. Early research was framed in terms of the "under-participation" of people of colour, which led to the development of ethnocentric and methodologically problematical "marginality" and "ethnicity" theories. There is, however, a growing body of research, educational and otherwise, which focuses on people of colour, and which privileges culture as being central to the research process. I argue that there are currently (at least) three interrelated "culturally sensitive research approaches" in use to differing extents in environmental education in its widest sense: "ethnic modeling in qualitative research;" "culturing" environmental education; and community based participatory research. I conclude by making a plea for "culturally sensitive research approaches" to become inherent in all environmental education research.

Résumé

Les questions de diversité raciale et culturelle ont constitué une certaine source d'intérêt pour les éducateurs environnementaux et de plein air. Les premiers travaux de recherche se sont articulés sous le signe d'une « sous-participation » des personnes de couleur, phénomène ayant donné lieu à l'élaboration de théories ethnocentristes de la « marginalité » et de l'« ethnicité » qui sont méthodologiquement problématiques. Il est toutefois une masse grandissante de recherches, éducationnelles et autres, consacrées aux personnes de couleur et qui privilégient la culture à titre d'élément central du processus de recherche. J'avance qu'il existe présentement (au moins) trois « approches culturo-sensibles en recherche » étroitement liées et que ces approches sont employées pour repousser les limites de l'ERE dans son sens le plus large : la « modélisation ethnique en recherche qualitative », la « culturalisation » de l'ERE et la recherche participative axée sur la communauté. Je conclus en préconisant l'adoption d'« approches culturo-sensibles en recherche » dans tous les travaux de recherche qui s'effectuent dans le domaine de l'ERE.

For some time now, researchers have questioned whether there are racial and cultural variations in the factors influencing environmental perceptions, attitudes and behaviours (Blake, 1999; Caro & Ewert, 1995; Caron, 1989; Dolin, 1988; James, 1993; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Schultz, Unipan, & Gamba, 2000; Sheppard, 1995; Taylor, 1989). The dominant idea is that if there are variations according to race and/or culture[1] as Taylor (1989) and others have suggested, then as environmental educators, our practice, pedagogies, and research methodologies should reflect this. There are two questions which follow this idea, both of which I will reflect upon. First, "if racial and cultural variation is happening, are we as educators reflecting these variations?" Second, and more fundamentally, "is this comparative research the kind of research we should be relying on?"

In terms of curriculum content, pedagogy, and practice, there is some evidence that, in order to be more responsive to the needs of diverse[2] populations, creative things are beginning to happen which reflect the racial and cultural variation in our society (Agyeman, 1995, 1998; Bowers, 2001; Cajete, 1994; Lewis & James, 1995; Marouli, 2002; Rixecker, 1999; Russell, Bell, & Fawcett, 2000; Taylor, 1996). The same cannot be said in terms of research methodologies within mainstream environmental education. Other than a few examples, such as special editions of the journal *Race, Poverty and the Environment*, 6(2/3) on "Multicultural Environmental Education" (1996) and the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 7(1) on "Culturing Environmental Education" (2002), there seems to have been very little in the way of development of new research genres *specifically* aimed at understanding, characterizing and supporting racial and/or cultural diversity within much of mainstream environmental education. To find many of the new ideas and approaches in this area, one needs to look outside environmental education, towards general educational research, environmental justice and health education.

A Brief History of Racial and Cultural Diversity Research

In Britain and in the U.S., most of the early "environmental" research addressing racial and cultural diversity focused on outdoor recreation, rather than perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding environmental issues, although there are notable exceptions (see, for instance, Kreger, 1973; Van Ardsol, Sabagh, & Alexander, 1965; Washington, 1976). In a review article on research into the "concern gap" between blacks[3] and whites, Taylor (1989) builds on these early studies. She notes that:

> these studies indicate that the level of concern of blacks for the environment is consistently lower than that of whites. This "concern gap" is paralleled by an "action gap" that is, concern does not necessarily translate directly into action, therefore concern may result in some action, or no action at all. (p. 180)

In terms of outdoor recreation, research was comparative, focused on what Floyd, Shinew, McGuire, and Noe (1994) termed "under-participation." People of colour (mostly African Americans in the U.S.) were under-participating as visitors to rural environments in the U.S. (Meeker, Wood, & Lucas, 1991; Washburne, 1978) and Britain (Agyeman, 1989; Kinsman, 1995; Malik, 1992) when compared to whites. Recreation, whether walking, strenuous activity or nature study in U.S. national parks and natural areas (Klobus-Edwards, 1981) or in British national parks (Agyeman & Spooner, 1997), was seen as "a white thing." Indeed, Agyeman and Spooner argue that in terms of the British countryside, which they consider an exclusive, ecological, and white space, "the ethnic Other has been constantly redefined and renamed, reinforcing its difference and marginality from a white 'norm'"(p. 199). Later, this line of research was extended in the U.S. to Hispanic American and Asian American groups, but the patterns of similarities and differences were found to be less clear (Dwyer, 1993).

What was responsible for the under-participation of people of colour in outdoor recreation and their "Otherness?" U.S. researchers put forward many theories but the ones found most credible by the research "establishment" of the day, or what Stanfield (1994) calls "researchers of traditional dominant status (meaning white, usually male)" (p. 176) were the "marginality theory" (a "social psychological" theory according to Taylor [1989]) and the "ethnicity theory" (a "cultural" theory according to Taylor or a "subcultural" theory according to Floyd [1999]; see also Floyd, 1998). The marginality theory, according to Floyd et al. (1994) "emphasizes minority status as a causal factor in explaining 'under-participation' among black minorities . . . [it] . . . results primarily from limited economic resources which in turn are a function of historical patterns of discrimination" (p. 158; see also Washburne, 1978). The ethnicity theory "states that minority under-participation or intergroup variation results from differences between racial or ethnic groups in values, systems, norms and socialization patterns" (Floyd et al., 1994, p.158). In effect, the marginality theory proffers a socio-economic, and the ethnicity theory, a cultural explanation of the purported phenomenon of under-participation.

Another set of explanations has been put forward by Taylor (1989) under the category of "measurement errors." Her point is that "black environmental concern, support and activism may be masked by two types of measurement errors: (a) the use of inappropriate indicator measures and, (b) the sampling techniques, because blacks do not always show concern in ways that are easily measured" (p. 190). This point is well made, especially as two of the most used indicators, expenditure and time, are in short supply for many people of colour and sampling techniques often use "preconceived, pre-coded categories" (p.191) which may mean researcher and researched are talking about different things.

Clearly there are many problems with comparative, or under-representation research. Hart (2000) argues that:

> for many years orthodox methods in educational research assumed a scientific worldview. Associated with this perspective were taken-for-granted views of reality and knowledge construction which few researchers explored in sufficient depth to understand their implications for methodology and method. (p. 38)

Henderson (1998) agrees, and argues that a major factor which limits research on diverse groups is "methodological considerations." Taylor (1989) highlights "measurement errors," but only Floyd (1998) comments on their ethnocentricity. Comparative or under-participation research which promotes the marginality and ethnicity theories represents a pernicious form of ethnocentrism, which Stanfield (1994) argues "drives so much American and other Western social research on people of color" (p. 176). This is because whiteness is unproblematized as an ethnic or cultural signifier; it is seen as "normal" and its assumptions are seen as reasonable. How can we be cognizant of Hart's (2000) "taken-for-granted views of reality and knowledge construction," Henderson's (1998) "methodological considerations," while avoiding Taylor's (1989) "measurement errors" and Floyd's (1998) accusations of "ethnocentrism"? In short, how can we challenge the "ethnic hegemonic character of American and other Eurocentric traditions" (Stanfield, 1994, p. 177)?

Initially, I asked the question "is this comparative research the kind of research we should be relying on?" There is a growing body of research, educational and otherwise, which focuses on people of colour and rather than problematizing "under-representation" as *the* focus of research, privileges *culture* as being central to the research process. African American (Stanfield, 1994), Chicana and Chicano (González, 2001), Maori (Bishop, 1998; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and Native American researchers (Cajete, 1994; Lomawaima, 2000) have all argued for approaches and methodologies that consciously recognize and utilize indigenous cultural knowledge(s) and experiences. Using this as my platform, I want to argue that there are at least three interrelated "culturally sensitive research approaches" (Tillman, 2002) currently in use to differing extents in environmental education in its widest sense: "ethnic modeling in qualitative research" (Stanfield, 1994); "culturing" environmental education (Agyeman, 2002); and Community Based Participatory Research.

"Ethnic Modeling" in Qualitative Research

Stanfield (1994) argues that "ethnic modeling in qualitative research must involve calling into serious question the vast warehouse of knowledge that researchers of European descent have been accumulating and legitimizing as ways of knowing and seeing" (p. 183). This would mean, as was argued above, not just challenging the marginality and ethnicity theories in outdoor

and environmental education research, or doing ethnocentric research more sensitively, but, as Stanfield argues, "creating novel indigenous paradigms grounded distinctly in the experiences of people of colour" (p. 183).

This is not such a radical idea as it may seem, or as Stanfield (1994) seems to have thought. In a plea for cultural pluralism in education, which rejects both assimilation and separatism, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Commission on Multicultural Education's (1978) policy statement, "No One Model American," argues for:

- the teaching of values which support cultural diversity and individual uniqueness;
- the access of all cultures;
- the support of explorations in alternative and emerging lifestyles; and
- the support of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multidialectism.

While the policy statement doesn't specifically mention a new genre of research in support of these laudable aims, it is implicit, rather than explicit in the policy.

Stanfield (1994) argues that there are two reasons for developing "novel indigenous paradigms." First, and most importantly he argues that such paradigms will:

> isomorphize rather than impose cognitive map criteria that structure theory development, methodological strategies, data interpretations, and knowledge dissemination. This would eliminate the dilemmas, contradictions, and distortions generated when researchers involved in work with people of colour operate on Eurocentric cognitive map criteria, no matter how progressive or liberating. (p. 183)

Second, he asks "what happens when the tables are turned—when the lifeworlds of the dominant are investigated and interpreted through the paradigmatic lenses of people of color" (p. 183)? Like Tillman's (2002) framework below, Stanfield (1994) argues strongly for "a generalizable qualitative methods epistemology for people of colour structured around verbal communication . . . . grounded in holistic rather than fragmented and dichotomized notions of human beings" (p. 185).

"Culturing" Environmental Education

In *Volume 7*(1) of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, I acted as Guest Editor of the special edition on "Culturing Environmental Education." The title was chosen, rather than "multicultural environmental education," because:

> "multicultural environmental education," yet another "adjectival adjectival education," was seen as being too easy to ghettoize within the flowering of competing arenas within environmental education. Most importantly however, in our minds, multicultural environmental education could (and would?) be interpreted as a (disposable) *part* of environmental education, not the whole. It would be seen as "targetable" environmental education: "remedial" environmental education. It would be seen as something "*they* do in cities," or something "*for* diverse populations." (Agyeman, 2002, p. 6)

This problem with multicultural environmental education was largely confirmed by Marouli's (2002) research into the state of multicultural environmental education in the U.S.

In a critique of mainstream environmental education prepared for the Second People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit 2002, which attracted 1400 environmental justice activists, Grass and Agyeman (2002) wrote that:

> the role of environmental education in maintaining and reproducing an exclusionary environmental agenda is clear. Environmental curricula and pedagogies which don't reflect multiple cultural perspectives or address the social equity dimensions of issues, reinforce limited concepts of the environment and environmental protection; circumscribe and legitimate a partial environmental discourse and consequently do not produce informed students, committed graduates or empowered and enlightened environmental leaders. (unpaginated)

The environmental justice movement has, virtually since its beginnings in the early 1980s in Warren County, North Carolina, been an advocate for culturing approaches to environmental education. However, in 1991, with the publication of *The Principles of Environmental Justice*, the movement defined specifically what it wanted to see: Principle 16 stated that "environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives" (unpaginated). This Principle bears a close resemblance to the exhortations of Stanfield (1994) and Tillman (2002) in elevating the role of *experience* and *culture*.

That said, much of the discourse about the influence of cultural diversity in environmental education and "alternative" research genres is identified as being within the remit of multicultural environmental education. There is good news and bad news in this. The good news is that there is clearly a discursive space within multicultural environmental education for "alternative" research methods (including "ethnic modeling" and Community Based Participatory Research). The bad news is that, as I have argued (Agyeman, 2002), and as Marouli (2002) has pointed out, "multicultural environmental education programs often really target culturally marginalized groups, excluding the dominant one(s)" (p. 39). In this case, it is likely that the majority of people in the dominant group(s), including both teacher and taught are not

being exposed to *difference*, in terms of both curriculum content and research method. (See Kaza [2002], and below for an exception.)

The contributors to the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, *7*(1) made some excellent points which I'd like to draw on below. Simpson (2002) argues that we must not just educate in a culturally *appropriate way*, rather we must educate in a culturally inherent way. Without going into the theory of cultural competency (see Agyeman, 2001; Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989), I would argue that we can extend Simpson's idea to racial and cultural research in environmental education. In fact, one of the only ways to overcome ethnocentrism in our research would be to make racial and cultural issues *inherent* in all such research, rather than focusing on them solely when they *themselves* are the research focus. This would go some way to addressing the problem identified by Stanfield (1994) that "there are certain corners of Western life, such as the modern social sciences and sciences in general, in which the fundamental influences of ethnicity in shaping interpretations of reality are ignored or given only minimal attention" (p. 175).

Kaza (2002) utilizes the liberation theology of Gerard Fourez to raise critical issues surrounding race, power, and justice. Fourez (1982) developed a four step model which assesses dominant social norms and names the promulgating agents, notes how these norms serve those in power, develops the process of *conscientization*, and finally assists in the articulation of a structural ethics to address (white) privilege and power asymmetries. Kaza and her colleagues use Fourez's model to immerse students in researching environmental justice at the predominantly white and wealthy University of Vermont. She notes that through this experience, students recognize their own *denial*, they get firsthand experience of *inequity*, they become aware of their own *complicity*, and finally, they witness *resistance*.

Lotz-Sisitka and Burt (2002) challenge the "conventional" environmental education research culture in asking questions about the representation of environmental education research. Implicit in their paper is that there are many (research) cultures in environmental education. They ask "whether the conventional 'thesis' with its culture, history and tradition is the only way" and make the point "if, in environmental education work we are serious about a process of social transformation, perhaps we need to reflexively review and continue to bravely re-search our textual conventions in a way that will contribute to our own and others' learning in research" (p. 148).

What each of these contributors shows is how culture affects their work on many scales, and in many dimensions. In many ways, the prefix "culturing" should be superfluous; environmental education is inherently about culture. However, until curriculum content, pedagogy and practice, and research methodologies reflect this, the prefix must stay.

Community Based Participatory Research

In 1994, The National Institute of Health Sciences facilitated an interagency conference on "Health Research Needs to Ensure Environmental Justice." According to Shepard, Northridge, Prakas, and Stover (2002), the conference, "attended by over 1000 persons, 400 of whom were environmental justice advocates . . . [,] resulted in an expressed appreciation of the importance of community involvement in setting and implementing research agendas to address environmental justice issues" (p. 139). Finally, here was an "educational" success for the environmental justice movement, after its problems with the "environmental education establishment." Community Based Participatory Research fulfilled Environmental Justice Principle 16 to the letter in that it is "based on *our* experience and an appreciation of *our* diverse cultural perspectives" (my emphasis).

How has the U.S. environmental justice movement got from North Carolina to the National Institute of Health Sciences in less than 20 years? The federal and state apparatus, such as former President Clinton's "Executive Order 12898," and the growing number of state policies have played their part. However, the pivotal act was the problematization by activists of the word "environment." The grassroots (re)definition of environmental issues, not (only) as wildlife, recreational, or resource issues, but as issues of *justice*, *equity*, and *rights* gave birth to the environmental justice movement. In so doing, "environment" became discursively different: it became an issue not just for the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, and the North American Association for Environmental Education, but for the Civil Rights Movement. This aligning of the environmental justice "frame" with the Civil Rights "frame" has conferred a status on the concept of environmental justice and the movement which must not be underestimated.

What is Community Based Participatory Research? According to the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute (2003):

> community-based participatory research is a *process* that involves community members or recipients of interventions in all phases of the research process, including (a) identifying the health[4] issues of concern to the community; (b) developing assessment tools; (c) collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; (d) determining how data can be used to inform actions to improve community health; (e) creating the research designs; (f) designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions; and (g) disseminating findings. (unpaginated)

Shepard et al. (2002) build on this definition. First, "scientists[5] work in close collaboration with community partners involved in all phases of the research, from the inception of research questions and study design, to the collection of the data, monitoring of ethical concerns, and interpretation of the study results." Second, "in Community Based Participatory Research, the research findings are communicated to the broader community—including

residents, the media and policymakers—so they may be utilized to effect needed changes in environmental and health policy to improve existing conditions." Third, Community Based Participatory Research "seeks to build capacity and resources in communities and ensure that government agencies and academic institutions are better able to understand and incorporate community concerns into their research agendas" (p. 139). In terms of educational research, Dillard's (2000) work on "endarkened"[6] feminist epistemology and Kershaw's (1990, 1992) work on Afrocentric emancipatory methodology would support Community Based Participatory Research as a culturally sensitive research form. Both emphasize the need for connections between researcher and researched, the need to understand the multiple realities and experiences of African Americans and the need for collaborative, or co-constructed data interpretation.

Shephard's organization is called West Harlem Environmental Action. They have been involved for the past six years in a Community Based Participatory Research program involving the Harlem Health Promotion Center, the National Institute of Health Sciences Center for Environmental Health in Northern Manhattan at the Mailman School of Public Health. She notes that "this partnership has resulted in a variety of environmental justice achievements: air monitoring studies published in peer reviewed journals, training courses for community leaders on environmental health topics, educational forums for community residents on environmental justice issues, and meaningful input into policy decisions" (Shephard et al., 2002, p. 139). Stanfield (1994) however sounds a note of caution:

> I consider the participatory research movement only a partial solution because, although participatory research attempts to empower examined human beings and their social organizations, rarely do researchers share career rewards with "subjects" of color, such as co-authorships and access to authoritative credentializing processes. (p. 139)

A variant of Community Based Participatory Research which has been used in environmental education is "Action Research and Community Problem Solving." Wals (1996) explains that "Action Research and Community Problem Solving represents an inquiry process that enables teachers and students to participate more fully in the planning, implementing and evaluating of educational activities, aimed at resolving an environmental issue that the learners themselves have identified" (p. 302). Crucially in the context of this paper, Wals continues that "the definition of an environmental issue largely depends on the perceptions and experiences of the learner and on the context in which education takes place" (p. 302). What this means is that what the facilitator considers an "environmental" issue, and what the students consider to be one may be very different. This was certainly the case in Wals' research at Pistons Middle School in Detroit where safety and security emerged as key "environmental" issues among the students. Given a different (culturally *in*sensitive) research

methodology, this could have been a classic case of a sampling technique that used "preconceived, pre-coded categories" (Taylor, 1989, p. 191) about what is or is not an environmental issue, which would have meant that the researcher and researched were talking about different things.

Concluding Thoughts

Early attempts to research issues of racial and cultural diversity in outdoor and environmental education focused around "under-representation" and used marginality and ethnicity theories to explain why this was so. Many contemporary researchers consider these theories and this kind of research ethnocentric (Floyd, 1998), fraught with methodological problems (Henderson, 1998), prone to measurement errors (Taylor, 1989) and possessing an "ethnic hegemonic character" (Stanfield, 1994, p. 177). Clearly, of critical importance in avoiding ethnocentrism in environmental education research is the recognition of difference, of racial and cultural diversity, of "Other" perspectives and voices and the asymmetry of power relationships within much traditional research.

If we are serious about racial and cultural diversity as a strength and resource within environmental education, then, as I have argued elsewhere (Agyeman, 2002), we "need to (re)frame environmental education along lines which recognize cultural diversity and all its implications . . . as *the* project for environmental educators" (p. 10). At the same time, and as a critical component of this reframing, I would like to see, at the very least, more research in environmental education that, like Community Based Participatory Research, can be said to encompass "culturally sensitive research approaches" (Tillman, 2002) and, at best, that such approaches become inherent in environmental education research.

Tillman (2002) has developed a framework which in many ways synthesizes my three interrelated approaches above. Her framework "represents theoretical and methodological possibilities for more culturally informed research, theory and practice" (p. 3). She acknowledges its roots in the work of Dillard (2000) and Kershaw (1990, 1992), and also acknowledges Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) alluding "to the use of culturally sensitive research approaches in their five interpretive paradigms of qualitative research" (Tillman, 2002, p. 5). While her focus is on African American lifeworlds, I feel that the five non-linear process-based characteristics of such research (below) could, with care and sensitivity, be expanded to any racial or cultural group.[7]

She suggests using:

Culturally congruent research methods. The use of qualitative methods such as interviews with individuals and groups and life histories is encouraged. The reasoning behind this is that such methods offer an opportunity to look at a

holistic and contextualized picture of all factors affecting the everyday lives of African Americans, especially in educational settings.

- *Culturally specific knowledge*. This includes using the self-defined experiences of African Americans.
- *Cultural resistance to theoretical dominance*. This means recognizing the power asymmetries of those with assumed knowledges from outside African American cultural standpoints, and privileging those with experience of the economic, socio-political and educational consequences of such asymmetries.
- *Culturally sensitive data interpretations*. Experiential knowledge is seen as a legitimate and appropriate platform for analyzing, understanding, and communicating data deemed appropriate to both the research focus and the person or people co-constructing the study. Data presentation methods may include "storytelling, family histories, biographies, narratives, and other forms" (Tillman, 2002, p. 6).
- *Culturally informed theory and practice*. Theory, based on endarkened perspectives, is generated by using the participants views and cultural perspectives to develop connections between "espoused theory and reality" (Tillman, 2002, p. 6).

Being aware of the problems inherent in proposing "guidelines" (see *Environmental Education Research*, *6*(1), 2000), or being too prescriptive, or universalizing, I offer up Tillman's (2002) framework merely as a point of discussion, a potential starting point in what I believe to be a necessary (and imminent) paradigm shift in environmental education towards more "culturally sensitive research approaches."

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

[1] It is important to remember that "racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed, and social definitions of these categories have changed over time" (Tatum, 1997, p. 16). Race in this paper will refer only to physical attributes, such as skin colour and facial features. Cultural and/or ethnic groups are "a group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived to share cultural traits such as language, religion, family customs, and preferences in food" (Chavez, 2000, p. 180).

2   By "diverse," I mean people in the non-dominant social system reflecting the range of gender, identity, racial, cultural, able/disabled, age, and socioeconomic status formations.

3   Where an author specifically uses the term "black," it will be used in this article.

4   As mentioned before, much of the work on Community Based Participatory Research is health based, but its usefulness extends beyond health issues.

5   The word "scientist" merely reflects Peggy Shephard's (2002) work in environmental health. The word "researcher" could just as easily have been used.

6   Dillard (2000) uses the phrase "endarkened" feminist epistemology "to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance of African-American women (p. 662).

7   Being aware of the dangers of universalizing discourse, I am suggesting that the five non-linear process-based characteristics could be used as a model for other groups. Within these characteristics, the methods, knowledges, data interpretation, and relationship between theory and practice would need to be group specific.

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