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Who is an Environmentalist? The Polysemy of Environmentalist Terms and Correlated Environmental Actions

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Abstract

Conducting and interpreting an interview is more problematic when informants use a word that has multiple meanings and interpretations. In this case, the problematic word, “environmentalist,” labeled several socially-defined identities that were central to the study. The analysis is based on interviews with 156 members of 20 diverse environmental groups (and two comparison groups) in the Eastern United States, including their views on environmentalists, their history with the movement, their self-identification as an environmentalist, and their environmental actions. From these data, principles of classification and naming are used to distinguish the multiple meanings of the identity “environmentalist.” We found that informants use the term to describe four distinct types of people: 1) those who say they care about the environment but take no public actions; 2) those who act to preserve local habitat often through private actions (also called “conservationists”); 3) those who act in the civic or political realm, by writing to representatives or attending hearings (also called “activists”); and 4) those who act via demonstrations, civil disobedience, or “direct action” such as blocking logging operations (also called “radicals”). These differing meanings are sometimes used strategically by participants to position themselves, or opponents, within the environmental movement. The polysemy of the word environmentalist renders it a poor choice for questions in surveys and interviews unless disambiguating paraphrases are added. Additionally, cross-tabulation shows that named environmental identities are indicators of behavior—self-defined environmentalists also reported significantly more environmental actions. Words or paraphrases that distinguish among the multiple meanings of “environmentalist” further improve these identity terms as predictors of behavior.

Introduction

This paper examines how members of environmental groups and, to a lesser degree, the public define and use the word “environmentalist,” and how such definitions of self relate to individual environmental actions. Although the meaning of “environmentalist” varies across individuals, and shifts as the same individual uses it on different occasions, we will show that these variations follow regular patterns. Decoding these semantic shifts can improve our understanding of identities within the environmental movement, better relate identity to behavior, and increase validity when using the term¹ in survey or interview questions.

In the beginning of what is now considered the American environmental movement, the term “environmentalist” was not used. Early thinkers, such as Thoreau, Emerson, Muir and Leopold wrote of nature or wilderness rather than the environment. By the late 1800s, the movement split into “conservationists” versus “preservationists.” The conservationists, led by Gifford Pinchot (cf. Miller 2004) sought to manage forests and other natural resources so as to efficiently extract them for human use. In opposition, the preservationists, led by John Muir, worked to set natural resources aside, guarding them from human use and interference (for a first clear statement, see Muir 1898).

The modern term “environmentalist” did not become widespread until the 1960s. In that decade, environmentalism evolved from an upper class attempt to save land for recreation to a movement to decrease pollution and other systemic stresses (Silveira 2001). The shift was partly based on scientists’ popular writing (e.g., Carson 1962) and the resulting movement now cuts across class and race lines (Mohai 2003). The term “environmentalist,” said to have been used in the 1960s to denote “people who were concerned about the physical environment, the pollution of our air and water,” (Wiley 1998) is the term most widely used for those in the movement today, and is the primary subject of our analysis.

Webster’s New World Dictionary lists two definitions for the word “environmentalist.” The first is a “person who accepts the theory that environment is of overriding importance in determining individual characteristics.” The second, and the one appropriate to this study, is a “person working to solve environmental problems, such as air and water pollution, the exhaustion of natural resources, and uncontrolled population growth” (Webster 1991).

We expect that this second dictionary meaning, a person “working to solve environmental problems” was intended when the Gallup organization began asking the question: “Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist, or not?” However, U.S. survey

respondents must have interpreted it otherwise, because affirmative answers have varied over the past decade from 50 percent to 70 percent (e.g., answers in 1995 were 63 percent yes, 35 percent no, 3 percent don’t know/refused; Gallup poll released March 21, 1995). This question was last reported in 1999, when 50 percent answered yes. In the spring of 2000, the Gallup organization included a more refined set of questions related to environmental identity (but did not report on the “consider yourself to be an environmentalist” question; Saad and Dunlap 2000). These questions are listed in Table 1, with the percentage of affirmative answers to each.

Table 1 shows that the number of people answering yes, they do consider themselves an “environmentalist,” is fewer than those agreeing with the goals of the movement, but well above those saying they “belong to” groups or more vaguely, are “active participants” in the movement. Thus, not only are poll respondents not responding in the Webster’s definition of the word, they are not matching any of the other survey questions that might plausibly be considered indicators of, or synonyms for, “environmentalist.”

Part of the ambiguity of “environmentalist” stems from individual discourses found within environmental groups, ranging from conservationism and preservationism to deep ecology and ecofeminism

Table 1. Recent positive answers to “environmentalist” (from Gallup’s March 1999 survey) and related survey questions (Saad and Dunlap 2000).

| Survey question | Affirmative % |
|--|---------------|
| Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist (from March 1999 Gallup poll) | 50% |
| Do you agree with goals of the environmental movement (Saad and Dunlap 2000) | 83% |
| Are you an active participant in the environmental movement (Saad and Dunlap 2000) | 16% |
| Do you belong to a national or international environmental organization (Saad and Dunlap 2000) | 5% |
| Do you belong to any environmental groups or organizations in your local community, region or state (Saad and Dunlap 2000) | 9% |

(Brulle 1996, 2000). The reluctance of individuals to self-label themselves as environmentalists while agreeing with the associated values is somewhat parallel to some women's discomfort with self-labeling themselves feminists, even while agreeing with feminist values, because of negative connotations associated with the term (Berryman-Fink and Verderber 1985; Henley et al. 1998; Twenge and Zucker 1999).

We do not believe that the mid-range 50 percent response seen in the first row of Table 1 means that "environmentalist" denotes some middle level between agreeing with the stated goals and being "an active participant." Rather, we argue that "environmentalist" is ambiguous in specific ways that we shall enumerate, and that the differing interpretations of the question by survey respondents lead to the intermediate level of response.

Methods

Data analyzed for this study came from semi-structured interviews with 156 members of 20 environmental groups and of two non-group comparison samples (i.e., environmental scientists and the public), in North Carolina and the Delmarva Peninsula. The groups were selected to capture the diversity found in a comprehensive census of 566 local environmental groups in these two areas (Kempton et al. 2001); selection of the 20 groups and two comparison samples is described in Kitchell et al. (2000). The theoretical rationale for the larger study of environmental identity and action, of which this article is a part, can be found in Kempton and Holland (2003).

The semi-structured interviews included questions asking the interviewee to state "Who am I;" whether they consider themselves an environmentalist; a narrative of their awareness of environmental damage; when and where they got the idea of what being an environmentalist means; a listing of various environmental groups that the interviewee belongs to; and the actions the interviewee does that affect the environment. Interviews were taped and transcribed. Qualitative data are presented as verbatim quotations. Analysis of the interviews consisted of multiple readings, then coding for 71 variables. Most variables were coded by an absence or presence of the

trait (e.g., most were coded 1 for 'present' if mentioned one or more times in the interview, and coded as 0 if never mentioned by that informant). A few variables were coded as counts, e.g., representing the number of local environmental groups of which the respondent was a member. The quantitative analysis summarizes present/absent variables as percentages, and summarizes count variables as means. Statistical differences between means are tested with the student's *t*-test. Relationships between two count variables are correlated using Kendall's τ . Our use of the probability for those two statistics is descriptive rather than hypothesis testing, so we do not set a critical *p* value.

The "Who am I" question elicited a free listing of identity names (the full question is described subsequently). For quantitative analysis we categorized these names. Our categories, and most common responses falling into the categories, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of common responses to the Identity Test ("Who Am I").

| Category of identity | Examples of labels given by informants |
|----------------------|---|
| Kin | mother, wife, son, brother |
| Place | resident of _____; neighbor |
| Citizen | voter; volunteer |
| Consumer | consumer, conscious consumer; bargain-hunter |
| Ecosystem role | human; top predator |
| Environmental | environmentalist; person who cares about environment; nature lover |
| Activist | activist, feminist activist |
| Animal/Plant lover | dog lover; cat lover; animal lover |

Table 3. A list of the environmental groups interviewed, their group type and a brief description of the group.^a

| Group Abbreviation^b | Group Name | Group type | Brief Description |
|---------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|--|
| BRGG | Blue Ridge Gamelands Group ^c | Wise Use | Preserve wild areas for hunting |
| CU | Citizens Unite | Civic | Organize and carry out local political actions for clean air and water |
| CCRC | Concerned Citizens for Rutherford County | Civic | Grassroots effort opposing wood chip mills in North Carolina |
| DNS | Delaware Nature Society | Civic | Large state membership organization doing education and state lobbying |
| DSC | Delaware Sierra Club | Civic | Local chapter of the national Sierra Club |
| Ducks | Ducks Unlimited | Conservation | Delaware regional chapter that preserves waterfowl habitat through purchase and other means |
| Earthaven | Earthaven | Consumer | Ecovillage based on sustainable living and permaculture |
| EDF | Environmental Defense Fund ^d | National | Members make annual financial payment and receive newsletter; professional staff lobby, advocate and take legal action |
| EF! | EarthFirst! | Radical | Local chapter that focuses on direct action |
| EJ | Environmental Justice | Environmental Justice | Several groups working on environmental problems affecting African Americans |
| GD | Green Delaware | Radical | Organizes demonstrations and other confrontational actions |
| HazTrak | The HazTrak Coalition | Civic | Takes civic and lobbying action on groundwater contamination and other issues |
| NHSNS | Newark High School Nature Society | Student | Nature cleanup and other student activities |
| NREA | New River Fisherman's Association | Fishing ^e | Organize action by fishermen against fishing laws and regulations |
| NWPC | Nanticoke Watershed Preservation Committee | Civic | Protection of the Nanticoke River and watershed through civic and political actions |
| PFA | Pamlico Fishing Auxiliary | Fishing | Wives of fishermen organized to advocate for fishermen and protection of Bay |
| Public | Public | Public | Samples of North Carolina and Delmarva adults |
| Ruckus | Ruckus Society | Radical | Provides training for non-violent civil disobedience actions |
| Scientist | Scientist | Scientist | Professionals, mostly associated with the EPA |
| SEAC | Student Environmental Action Coalition ^f | Student | College students advocate for environmental measures at university; some demonstrations |
| TSWA | Tangier Sound Waterman's Association | Fishing | Fishermen organized to promote small commercial fishing and protect the Bay |

^a For more comprehensive group profiles please see Kitchell et al. (2000).

^b Group abbreviations are presented in alphabetical order.

^c The Blue Ridge Gamelands Group (BRGG) is a group pseudonym.

^d The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) has been renamed Environmental Defense (ED), but will be referred to in this paper as Environmental Defense Fund.

^e Fishing groups are one specific example of resource user organizations.

^f The Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) is an international organization that has student groups affiliated with it. The University of Delaware affiliate has, since the time of the interview, changed its name to Students for the Environment (SFE). This paper will continue to call this group SEAC.

Other data used in this paper draw from two sections of the semi-structured interview. The first section elicits the respondent's self-identification as an environmentalist using the question, "Do you consider yourself an environmentalist or not? (if so:) Would you say you are a strong environmentalist?" The second section involves the respondent's answers about their awareness of what being an environmentalist means to him/her: "Where did you get the idea of what it means to be an environmentalist?" and (if appropriate) "Why do you think you didn't include 'environmentalist' on your 'Who am I' list?"

To facilitate comparisons, similar groups among the 20 were collapsed, yielding eleven group types, as shown in Table 3. Here we refer to them by individual group name (e.g., "The Haztrak Coalition"), by one of the environmental group types (e.g., civic groups), or by the two comparison group names (either public or environmental scientists). See Table 3 and Kitchell et al. (2000) for more detailed definitions of these eleven group types.

Our sample is drawn from two areas along the US Eastern seaboard. However, in word meaning, we believe the differences we capture among groups are much greater than regional differences within the US. On the other hand, usage of these terms in other English-speaking cultures is likely to be very different (Taylor 1995).

Marking Theory and Definitions of "Environmentalist"

In our interviews, the word "environmentalist" is used in different ways by different people, and sometimes varies in use by the same person depending on the context. Part of the variation in the meaning of "environmentalist" can be understood according to general linguistic principles of classification and naming called "marking" (Greenberg 1966; Berlin 1977). Marking theory explains how the same word, with or without modifiers, can refer to both a more general and a more specific category.

We explain the concept and our notation via a simple example of classification and marking, not related to environmentalism—the different levels of meaning of the English word "cup." This example draws from Kempton (1978; also see 1981:4-9) and

Labov (1973). In its general level of meaning, "cup" refers to any drinking vessel, including a paper cup, a glass tumbler, or a coffee cup. Or, it can be more specific, so that "cup" can mean a vessel with a handle for drinking hot liquids, in contrast to handleless cups for cold liquids. The category for hot liquid cups can be further broken down into whether the cup is a coffee cup (a coarser vessel, also called a "mug") versus a cup such as that made of fine china and used for tea. Table 4 shows a block diagram illustrating these three levels of meaning. The three meanings of "cup" are distinguished by subscripts (Cup₁, Cup₂, and Cup₃), with paraphrases for each in parentheses.

As seen in Table 4, "cup" has different meanings at three levels of taxonomy, with each level contrasting with other terms at the same level. This seeming ambiguity rarely causes problems in real-world language use. When discussing real objects in context, people easily shift levels of meaning of "cup" depending on the context. For example, one can imagine the following sequence of requests, using shifting meanings of cup: "Hand me a cup, not that plate" (interpreted as Cup₁, at top level in Table 4), then "No, a cup, not the tumbler" (Cup₂, at second level), and finally, "No, the cup, not that heavy mug" (Cup₃, at lowest level).

We will demonstrate that parallel multiple meanings can be seen for the word "environmentalist." The following quotation from a member of the local Delaware Chapter of the Sierra Club is one of many interviews using the highest level (most general) meaning of "environmentalist." He suggests one meaning of environmentalist as a "certain segment of society," but focuses on a higher-level meaning, which we infer to be something like "anyone concerned about the environment."

It seems like people categorize a certain segment of our society as environmentalist ... I think actually that everybody is an environmentalist to a certain degree because they're concerned about their life, and I think people are more or less aware of how their actions affect them and other people, but you, when you say "environmentalist," to me that's a pretty all encompassing thing, and I think if you dig down, I'd think you find that most people are environmentalists. There's just some that are really ignorant environmentalists. (Dave, Delaware Sierra Club, Civic)

Table 4. Diagram of three differing meanings of the term “cup” at different levels (adapted from Kempton 1978; Labov 1973).

| | | |
|--|--|--------------------------------------|
| Cup ₁ (any drinking vessel) | | |
| [no term] (Paper cup, tumbler, drinking glass, etc.) | Cup ₂ (any drinking vessel with a handle, used for hot liquids) | |
| | Mug (thick coffee cup) | Cup ₃ (fine china teacup) |

Table 5. Diagrams of meanings of the term environmentalist: (a) as used by some environmental group members and (b) as used by conservationists and resource users; and (c) our synthesis of meanings based on combining responses from several groups.

(a)

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Non-environmentalists | Environmentalist ₁ (those who care about the environment) | |
| | [no term] (Those who care but do not act in the public sphere) | Environmentalist ₂ (those who act in the public sphere, that is, by lobbying, demonstrations, etc) |

(b)

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Non-environmentalists | Environmentalist ₁ | |
| | Environmentalist ₂ (conservationists) | Extremist environmentalist (activists, tree-huggers, fish-kissers, etc.) |

(c)

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Non-environmentalists | Environmentalist ₁ (those who care) | | | |
| | [no term] (Those who care but don't act in the public sphere) | Environmentalist ₂ (conservationists) | Environmentalist ₃ (activists, those involved in non-radical civic action) | Environmentalist ₄ (radicals, tree-huggers, fish-kissers, etc.) |

“Everybody is an environmentalist,” according to Dave,² in that almost everyone in the United States has some concern for how human actions on the environment affect themselves and other people.

In a second example, Edie gives “environmentalist” two more explicit meanings—one is a concerned person, and the second, a person who takes action.

Well, when you say environmentalist, a lot of people think ... you're somebody who just tries to go out and stop all these things, which I don't do that. But I am concerned, and so I guess you would say I would be an environmentalist. (Edie, New River Fisherman's Association, Fishing)

Using the same type of schematic figure as the cup example provided previously, the double meaning of “environmentalist,” as perceived by

mainstream environmental group members is diagrammed in Table 5a.

Table 5a shows that the top-level meaning of environmentalist (Environmentalist₁), people who care about the environment, is further distinguished by two subsets. One subset, also referred to by the name “environmentalist,” consists of those who both care about the environment and act in the public sphere to protect it (Environmentalist₂). The other subset is the people who care but do not act in the public sphere. As has been seen in other studies of meaning (including the “cup” category examples above), there is no distinct, widespread term for the latter subset, even though most Americans seem to categorize themselves this way (caring but not acting). They may act in the private sphere (recycling, not littering, etc.), but not in the public sphere.

The question used for a decade by the Gallup Survey, “do you consider yourself an environmentalist?” does not distinguish which meaning of “environmentalist” is intended. If respondents interpret the question using the top-level meaning, most Americans will answer “yes.” Those using the more specific, lower level meaning will answer “no” unless they are in the minority taking public sphere environmental actions. This explains why many members of the public will answer “yes” they are an Environmentalist₁ (those who care), even while we find some members of environmental groups answering “no” to this same question. We will refine this analysis shortly.

Other quotations from informants suggest variants of the above meanings. The variants roughly correspond to the type of environmental group one is in. For example, one variant separates “environmentalist” based on whether or not one’s beliefs are extreme, not by action as the previous example did. We often find this distinction in groups concerned with conservation (such as Ducks Unlimited) or groups of resource users (such as small commercial fishing groups):

You know, environmentalist is a very broad term. You know, I’m not a tree-hugger, but I am for conservation, I am for clean water, and so forth and so on. (Norman, Ducks Unlimited, Conservation)

Being an environmentalist, in my opinion, is caring about your surroundings. Being an extreme environmentalist is taking it a little bit too far. When you care more for the environment than you do for people—Save the Bay Foundation, extreme environmentalist. An extreme environmentalist cares, in my opinion, this is strictly my opinion, cares more about wildlife than they do human life. That’s extreme. (Cameron, Tangier Sound Waterman’s Association, Fishing)

These quotations suggest a categorization of environmentalist as seen in Table 5b. At the lower level of meaning, Environmentalist₂ is distinguished from “extreme environmentalist.”

The categories of Table 5b are used even when the specific words used for the categories may differ. For example, some members of conservation groups describe themselves as “conservationists,” distinguishing themselves from diversely-named other environmental identities.

We have lots of people who need housing and need food and all that kind of stuff, and it’s unrealistic to suppose that the world is going to stay as it was. So I tend to be a conservationist rather than a preservationist. I don’t want things to stay the same, ‘cause I realize this just can’t be. (Diana, Environmental Defense Fund, National).

I want people to think I’m not an extremist and I do have the ability to look at something rationally and say, yes, I understand, we need that and it’s a darned shame that it damages this or that. But in that respect I would not want to be known as an environmentalist if it had a negative connotation. Conservationists, they still use the natural resource but in a responsible manner. I also like preservation and preservationists, also, so I don’t want to say I’m one thing. (Iris, Delaware Nature Society, Civic)

In other words, they are using “conservationist” to mean a less extreme type of environmentalist, one who uses natural resources but does so responsibly. Thus, the meaning of this term in actual usage by members of the movement does not correspond to the *Webster’s* definition of conservationist as “a person who advocates the conservation, i.e., the official care, protection or management, of natural resources” (Webster 1991).

To diagram the use of terminology in the above quotations, the lower level terms in Table 5b would be “Conservationist” (rather than Environmentalist₂) on the left, and “Environmentalist₃” (rather than extreme environmentalist) on the right. If those terms were used, the semantic distinctions of Table 5b would be the same, although the terms used and perhaps the emphasis would be different.

Definitions of these terms are not socially isolated semantics; they are politicized and evaluative. This can be seen in the following quotations from members of resource user or wise use groups:

When I think about a lot of environmentalists, you know, I think bad about some of ‘em. I don’t dislike any environmentalists, but I think they kind of go overboard with some of it. (Paul, New River Fisherman’s Association, Fishing)

Well, I’m not against protecting the environment. I think the environmentalist has such a stigma

attached to it. You think of [them as] tree ... huggers and fish kissers. (Amy, Pamlico Fishing Auxiliary, Fishing)

My definition of a strong environmentalist is a Sierra Club environmentalist, the lot of those are anti-hunting, and I'm definitely not in that group, but I do care greatly about the environment... That's the kind of environmentalist I am. I hunt, fish, and all that, which some environmentalists don't like it, but I also care directly for the environment. (Sammy, Blue Ridge Gamelands Group, Wise Use)

Some informants volunteered that like many categories, the meanings of these terms can overlap and grade into each other (as shown by Kempton 1981). For example,

To me there's a fine line, a difference between a conservationist and environmentalist. I have a hard time separating those two. (Russell, Ducks Unlimited, Conservation)

This person sees less distinction also, in part, because their group, Ducks Unlimited, does not make it part of its self-defining group narrative (whereas wise use groups, for example, do). The division of conservationists from environmentalists is often emphasized by resource user and conservation groups (fishers, hunters, etc.). They acknowledge using the resource, whether fish or game, but place importance on their using it sustainably.

I was born and raised on a farm. Back in those days it was a two-horse farm because tractors weren't available and we worked to protect the land, not thinking about the environment so much as we're to protect the land because the land is how you made a living, and if you didn't protect your land you didn't protect the environment. (Brent, Blue Ridge Gamelands Group, Wise Use)

Growin' up we were taught to take care of things and manage things, especially what would take care of us. (John, Blue Ridge Gamelands Group, Wise Use)

People pretty well took care of the land. The local people especially because that was their birthright, that's what they had and they had to protect it if they lived off it. (Larry, New River Fishing Association, Fishing)

Therefore, they define themselves as environmentalists, and describe their actions as conserving the resources they use and value. At the same time, they distinguish themselves from what they call "preservationists," whom they consider extreme environmentalists who would curtail or prohibit any resource use in pristine areas.

Table 5c is our synthesis of diverse respondent answers. As seen in Table 5c, "environmentalist" can be used in any of these four ways plus a fifth category that is unlabelled by a more specific term (the subset of Environmentalists₁ who care but do not take either civic or radical actions). Table 5c combines responses from several groups to give an overall set of meanings commonly used by diverse informants. It does not include all distinctions previously discussed—it does not cover personal consumption actions as criteria for being an environmentalist, nor does it include actions taken by environmental scientists—but it covers the most commonly made distinctions. Although "activist" is listed in Table 5c as a synonym for Environmentalist₃, some informants use it as a term for Environmentalist₄ (e.g. Maureen, quoted below). Note that "Those who care but don't act in the public sphere" is in parenthesis and is labeled "[no term]"; it is simply a residual left over after other subcategories Environmentalist₁ have been delimited by analysis.

Individual informants in interviews often recognized these multiple meanings of "environmentalist," and discuss varying usage of the word. For example:

Well, they say, "Are you one of those environmentalists?" and they mean it like, "Are you one of those radical people that's got extreme views?" and so, they don't mean it in a positive way. But I'm changing that. (Kelly, Nanticoke Watershed Protection Committee, Civic)

You know, there's all different degrees of being an environmentalist... I wouldn't say I'm a "tree-hugger" in the sense of the word. I've heard that expression with some of the people who are really activists and do that type of thing. (Maureen, Concerned Citizens for Rutherford County, Civic)

Variation in usage is illustrated by data from our interviews, which use the survey question from Gallup's polling ("Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist or not?" *(If yes:)* "Would you say you are a strong environmentalist?"). Table 6 shows these varying uses across groups. Among our small public sample, about the same proportion say they *are* environmentalists as Gallup's most recent (1999) national poll—57 percent in our small sample. In some groups—those we have categorized as radical, lifestyle-changing, environmental justice, and national—100 percent of members responded that they considered themselves an "environmentalist."

But this was not true for all environmental groups. For members of most other environmental groups (those we have categorized as civic, conservation, fishing and student in Table 6) eight percent to 25 percent said they do not consider themselves environmentalists. We were surprised to find that eight percent to 25 percent of environmental group members did not consider themselves environmentalists, more so because we interviewed the most involved members of these groups. Wise use groups were a special case: 57 eight percent to 25 percent said "no," which many explained was because they prefer to label themselves by the term "conservationist."

Table 6. Cross-tabulation of group types with responses to the environmentalist survey questions.^a

| Group type (<i>n</i>) | "Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist?" | | (If Yes:) "... a strong environmentalist?" |
|---------------------------|---|---------|--|
| | No (%) | Yes (%) | Yes, strong (%) |
| Civic (38) | 8 | 92 | 74 |
| Conservation (8) | 13 | 87 | 50 |
| Environmental Justice (6) | 0 | 100 | 100 |
| Fishing (20) | 25 | 75 | 30 |
| Lifestyle (8) | 0 | 100 | 75 |
| National (10) | 0 | 100 | 80 |
| Public (14) | 43 | 57 | 29 |
| Radical (16) | 0 | 100 | 94 |
| Scientist (5) | 40 | 60 | 60 |
| Student (15) | 13 | 87 | 27 |
| Wise Use (7) | 57 | 43 | 14 |

^aNine of the interview informants refused to answer this question.

Table 7. Interpretation of responses to “Do you consider yourself an environmentalist, or not?” survey question by the public and members of local environmental groups.

| Group | Response | Meaning of Environmentalist used by respondent (from Table 5c) ^a | Paraphrases of the response |
|------------------------|----------|---|---|
| Public | Yes | 1 | “I care about the environment.” or “I have stronger environmental values than some people I know.” |
| Public | No | 1 | “I don’t care about the environment.” (rare) |
| Public or Group member | No | 2, 3 or 4 | “I don’t act in the political sphere, nor am I a radical.” “I am not radical.” or “I don’t do as much as others I know.” |
| Group member | Yes | 3 or 4 | “I act upon my environmental concern.” |

^a Key to meanings used by respondents for “environmentalist,” from Table 5c: 1 = those who care but don’t act; 2 = conservationists; 3 = involved in non-radical civic action; 4 = radical environmentalists.

How could eight percent to 25 percent of the most active members of local environmental groups, who are clearly working to improve the environment, say they are not environmentalists? And how could over 50 percent of the public claim that they are? We are now prepared to explain the differing responses to this question by the public and by members of environmental groups. Referring to the four subscripted meanings of “environmentalist” listed previously in Table 5c, “yes” and “no” responses from various groups are interpreted in Table 7 as referring to differing senses of the term “environmentalist.” The right-most column then gives our paraphrase of what our analysis suggests that they meant by a “yes” or “no” answer to this question.

Another way to evaluate the survey responses from Table 5c is to ask someone if they are in an environmental group, and if they take actions to help the environment. If they do either, they would be environmentalists by the Webster definition. (Also, since our interviews asked about actions, we crosschecked sporadically against reported behaviors, providing some validity check on the predictive value of alternative questions about self-defined identity.) Table 8 cross-tabulates the “consider self an environmentalist” question with the number of groups interviewees belong to and with self-reported actions

they take. Our coding of reported group membership was as counts rather than presence/absence—thus Table 8 gives mean counts rather than the percentages of some prior tables.

As shown in Table 8, informants answering “No” and “Yes, but not strong” are similar in number of groups they belong to and number of self-reported actions, with the latter being a little higher on some measures and lower on others. But those answering “Yes,” and subsequently answering that they are a “strong environmentalist” are higher by all measures, and quite significantly higher by measures such as the number of local groups they belong to, the number of national plus local groups, civic actions taken, and total actions taken. We conclude that, when the “strong” part is added to the “consider self an environmentalist” question, the phrase means approximately Environmentalist₃ or Environmentalist₄ from Table 5c. We therefore suggest that anyone analyzing the history of the Gallup questions might place more emphasis on the “strong” question. For future surveys, however, we do not recommend this wording, since informants themselves do not regularly use “strong environmentalist” in open-ended interviews, and we can only infer about the *ad hoc* meaning that survey respondents give to the question.

Table 8. Answers to the survey question “Do you consider yourself an environmentalist, or not?” cross-tabulated with: 1) the mean number of groups informants belong to; and 2) the mean number of actions they participate in. This table includes the public sample. Numbers are means of counts, not percentages.

| Responses to environmentalist survey questions (<i>n</i>) | No. groups belong to | | | | No. actions | | |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| | Local | Mail-in | Informal | Total | Civic | Consumer | Total |
| No (23) | 0.91 | 0.91 | 0.64 | 2.45 | 0.22 | 1.57 | 6.00 |
| Yes, not strong (39) | 1.27 | 0.76 | 0.41 | 2.43 | 0.36 | 1.72 | 6.97 |
| Yes, strong (85) | 2.66 | 1.52 | 0.48 | 4.66 | 1.01 | 1.86 | 9.68 |
| Pooled <i>t</i>-tests | | | | | | | |
| “No” and “Yes, not strong” versus “Yes, strong” | 4.69 $p \leq 0.0001$ | 2.01 $p = 0.05$ | 0.36 $p = 0.7$ | 3.99 $p \leq 0.0001$ | 4.86 $p \leq 0.0001$ | 1.16 $p = 0.3$ | 4.69 $p \leq 0.0001$ |
| “No” versus “Yes” | 3.04 $p = 0.003$ | 0.81 $p = 0.4$ | 1.25 $p = 0.2$ | 2.01 $p = 0.05$ | 2.99 $p = 0.003$ | 1.18 $p = 0.2$ | 3.35 $p = 0.001$ |

Use of Shifting Meanings in Context

We draw out the different meanings of “environmentalist” to better understand statements by movement participants and to show how differing meanings of the word can cause confusions on surveys and in conversations among environmental advocates. As noted, some of the previously described differences are the result of differences among groups (e.g., meanings of “environmentalist” by environmental group members [Table 5a] versus resource users [Table 5b]). At the same time, the differing categories are deliberately and strategically used to advantage within the movement and by opponents of particular environmental initiatives. The differing definitions of “environmentalist” are used, for example, to categorize oneself and others to advantage and to strategize how to position oneself (or opponents) within the environmental movement. This section discusses those tactical or strategic choices of meanings for the identity as an “environmentalist.”

Quotations from those active in civic groups show that participants deliberate about referring to themselves as an “environmentalist.” We cite one especially clear example here, from a person old enough to remember the term being introduced (she

was born in 1958, so she was 12 on the first Earth Day in 1970):

You know you have to watch out for terms anyway because to term yourself or somebody else as an “environmentalist,” “religious fanatic,” or to put a label on somebody...[is] limiting and it’s because you have an idea about what an environmentalist is and it might not be the same idea that I have, which may not be the same idea as somebody else has. When the term first started being used, widely, broadly, I actually had to think about whether I was an environmentalist...I wasn’t so sure. I hesitated a long time, years, to call myself an environmentalist...There seemed so much pressure to answer this question by a lot of people...I had to have an answer, and I had to be able to defend it either way. So, I decided, “ok, I’m an environmentalist.” (Carol, Nanticoke Watershed Protection Committee, Civic)

This is a revealing quotation. Carol is cautious about the use of labels, for herself and others. Yet, as the movement emerged during her lifetime, she felt social pressure (presumably from movement supporters as well as opponents) to define herself, and after some deliberation, adopted this movement label as her own identity.

Volunteered Identities

In addition to the data from the Gallup question and interview texts as quoted above, we also elicited identity terms. Identity was elicited by a free listing (based on Kuhn and MacPartland 1954), where respondents were given these directions at the beginning of the interview:

There are twenty numbered blanks on the top of this page [worksheet]. Please write twenty answers to the simple question "Who am I?". Just give twenty different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving answers to yourself, not to somebody else.

These are recorded during the interview as a list of words. For analysis, we coded for eight categories of identity labels: kin, place, citizen, consumer, ecosystem role, environmental, activist and animal/plant lover (Table 2 showed typical informant labels we placed into each of these coding categories). Thus, for example, a person might use four kin labels, one environmental label, and no activist labels. We will refer to our coding categories like "kin" and "activist" as volunteered identities (of course the actual word volunteered might have been, say, "mother" not literally "kin").

Since the public sample's elicited identities included no activist labels and only one environmental label, they are excluded from our subsequent tables. Thus the conclusions in this section, as in most of the paper, are about members of environmental and natural resource groups not about the public in general.

Table 9 cross-tabulates the Gallup question response with four of our categories of identity (environmental, activist, kin and place labels) for environmental group members. We first use this as a consistency check on the two ways we asked about environmental identity (survey question versus volunteered identity). Comparing the first two rows, there was no substantial difference in the number of people who volunteered an environmental identity across the "yes-no" answers to the Gallup question—that is, no difference between informants who answered "no" versus those who answered "yes" but subsequently said they were not "strong" environmentalists. Volunteered environmental identities are noticeably higher in the informants answering "yes" than "strong" (third row in Table 9). Thus the "strong environmentalist" question is a much better predictor of those who will volunteer an environmental identity when asked to say "Who Am I?" Since the "Who am I?" question is a standard and proven instrument for eliciting identity, the non-correspondence seen in Table 9 is evidence that the "Are you an environmentalist?" question is a poor indicator of environmental identity. A different observation that can be made from Table 9 is that the 17 people who said "no" when asked, "Are you an environmentalist?", volunteered on average 0.31 terms like "environmentalist" when asked "Who am I?" This is further strong evidence for the polysemy of this term, as demonstrated earlier. (Again, Table 9 and subsequent tables are only members of local environmental and resource groups.)

Table 9. Answers to the survey question "Do you consider yourself an environmentalist, or not?" cross-tabulated with volunteered identities. Public sample is not included in this table. Numbers represent the mean.

| Responses to environmentalist survey questions (<i>n</i>) | Volunteered Identity (responses to "Who am I?") | | | |
|---|---|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Environmental Labels | Activist Labels | Kin Labels | Place |
| No (17) | 0.31 | 0.38 | 2.75 | 0.44 |
| Yes, not strong (35) | 0.35 | 0.09 | 2.00 | 0.56 |
| Yes, strong (81) | 1.10 | 0.54 | 1.90 | 0.50 |
| Pooled <i>t</i>-tests | | | | |
| "No" and "Yes, not strong" versus "Yes, strong" | 4.12 $p \leq 0.0001$ | 2.83 $p = 0.005$ | 1.43 $p = 0.2$ | 0.14 $p = 0.9$ |
| "No" versus "Yes" | 2.06 $p = 0.04$ | 0.18 $p = 0.9$ | 1.92 $p = 0.1$ | 0.39 $p = 0.7$ |

Table 9 also compares the Gallup questions to three other volunteered identities—activist, kin, and place. Those volunteering their identities as activists answer the Gallup question by saying either that they are not environmentalists or, more often, that they are strong environmentalists; they rarely say they are environmentalists but not strong ones. A *t*-test shows that the volunteered “activist” identity is predicted by the “strong environmentalist” question, not at all by the “environmentalist” question. On kin and place identities, for which no relationship was predicted, differences are small and not significant by either distinction.

Tables 10 and 11 show the relationship of the volunteered identities, “environmentalist” and “activist,” respectively, to other volunteered identities. These volunteered identities are counts, with 0 or 1 values most common and two or more relatively rare. The rows show the average of other volunteered identities for zero versus one or more environmentalist (Table 10) or activist (Table 11) identities. We test for relationships using Kendall’s τ_b , rather than Pearson’s *r* (which assumes a normal distribution) and use the full count of volunteered terms, not the dichotomous “zero”/“one or more.” Probability values for τ_b are one-tailed.

Table 10. Environmentalist labels cross-tabulated with other volunteered identities. This table does not include the public sample.

| Volunteered Environmentalist Identity (<i>n</i>) | Volunteered Identity (responses to “Who am I?”) | | | | | | | |
|--|---|----------|-------|-------|---------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|
| | Environ- mentalist ^a | Activist | Kin | Place | Citizen | Ecosystem Role | Consumer | Animal Lover |
| Zero listed (72) | 0 | 0.33 | 2.03 | 0.55 | 0.35 | 0.20 | 0.12 | 0.09 |
| One or more listed (71) | 1.58 | 0.49 | 1.90 | 0.52 | 0.55 | 0.24 | 0.27 | 0.31 |
| τ | 1.00 | 0.21 | -0.05 | -0.06 | 0.20 | 0.14 | 0.10 | 0.21 |
| <i>p</i> ≤ | 0.0001 | 0.0002 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.0005 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.0002 |

^a This column and the zero/one rows are the same variable, volunteered identity “environmentalist.”

Tables 10 and 11 show that environmental group members describing themselves as environmentalists are more likely to also describe themselves as “activists” and vice-versa ($\tau_b = 0.21$, $p \leq 0.0002$). The most significant relationships ($p \leq 0.01$) with environmentalists are volunteered

identities as citizen, ecosystem roles, and animal lover. For activists, the strongest volunteered identities other than environmentalist are “ecosystem role” and “consumer.” Both are less likely to give kin or place identities, with activists volunteering place far less often.

Table 11. Activist labels cross-tabulated with other volunteered identities. This table does not include the public sample.

| Volunteered Activist Identity (<i>n</i>) | Volunteered Identity (responses to “Who am I?”) | | | | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------|------|-------|---------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|
| | Environ- mentalist | Activist ^a | Kin | Place | Citizen | Ecosystem Role | Consumer | Animal Lover |
| Zero listed (131) | 0.72 | 0.00 | 1.98 | 0.58 | 0.46 | 0.17 | 0.18 | 0.19 |
| One or more listed (12) | 1.67 | 2.42 | 1.83 | 0.08 | 0.33 | 0.75 | 0.33 | 0.25 |
| τ | 0.21 | 1.00 | 0.03 | 0.002 | 0.04 | 0.22 | 0.21 | 0.02 |
| <i>p</i> ≤ | 0.0002 | 0.0001 | 0.3 | 0.5 | 0.3 | 0.0001 | 0.0002 | 0.4 |

^a This column and the zero/one rows are the same variable, volunteered identity “activist.”

Another insight the distribution of the volunteered identities of environmentalist and activist offers can be seen from comparing them across our environmental group types (Table 12). These are consistent with our expectations—for example, in volunteered identities, none of the public defined themselves as activists and only one volunteered

him- or herself as an environmentalist. In the conservation groups, most identified themselves as environmentalists, but none as activists. In the natural resource oriented groups (fishers and wise use groups), only a minority identified themselves as environmentalists, while none identified themselves as activists.

Table 12. Volunteered identities of “environmentalist” and “activist” compared among our eleven group types.

| Group (<i>n</i>) | Environmentalist % (one or more labels) | Activist % (one or more labels) |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Civic (41) | 65.9 | 7.3 |
| Conservation (8) | 62.5 | 0 |
| Environmental Justice (6) | 50 | 16.7 |
| Fishing (20) | 15 | 0 |
| Lifestyle (12) | 41.7 | 16.7 |
| National (12) | 58.3 | 0 |
| Public (16) | 6.3 | 0 |
| Radical (16) | 50 | 31.2 |
| Scientist (5) | 80 | 20 |
| Student (15) | 40 | 0 |
| Wise Use (8) | 37.5 | 0 |

Does Identity Correlate with Behavior?

Our attention to identity will have an additional practical value if it is found to correlate with behavior. This section explores the relationship between environmental identity and environmental action. Actions were elicited by the open-ended question, “Are there any things you do to help the environment, or things you do less of to prevent damaging the environment?” Informants could list any activity they had done by themselves, as a member of a group or organization, or as an employee. From the open-ended responses we divided

“actions” into four different categories:³ consumer actions (recycling, consumer purchases, etc.); civic actions (voting, writing letters to politicians, etc.); lifestyle changes for the environment (becoming a vegetarian, changing jobs, etc.); and participatory actions (attending environmental group meetings/activities, teaching, etc.). The lifestyle and participatory actions were volunteered less frequently (cf. Kitchell et al. 2000); here we tabulate only the categories of consumer and civic actions, as well as the total number of actions volunteered regardless of our analytical categorizations.

For those who volunteered an identity as an environmentalist, we see more group membership and more reported environmental actions. This is shown in Table 13. Interviewees belonged to more total environmental groups and belonged to more of each of

the three group types we tabulated (local, mail-in, and informal). They also engaged in more total environmental actions and did more of each of the two action types (consumer and civic actions) we tabulated. All of these relationships are highly significant.

Table 13. Volunteered environmentalist identity cross-tabulated with 1) the number of groups informants belong to and 2) the number of actions they participate in. This table does not include the public.

| Volunteered Environmentalist Identity (<i>n</i>) | No. groups | | | | No. actions | | |
|--|------------|---------|----------|--------|-------------|----------|--------|
| | Local | Mail-in | Informal | Total | Civic | Consumer | Total |
| Zero listed (87) | 1.26 | 0.78 | 0.35 | 2.39 | 0.54 | 1.61 | 7.25 |
| One or more listed (72) | 2.86 | 1.81 | 0.59 | 5.26 | 1.01 | 1.92 | 10.30 |
| τ | 0.38 | 0.22 | 0.14 | 0.39 | 0.25 | 0.11 | 0.32 |
| $p \leq$ | 0.0001 | 0.0001 | 0.003 | 0.0001 | 0.0001 | 0.01 | 0.0001 |

Individuals who volunteered their identity as “activist” (Table 14), like the environmentalists, belonged to more total environmental groups and committed more environmental actions. They belonged to more local and informal environmental groups and engaged

in more civic actions than “non-activists;” the correlation of civic actions with activist identity is higher than with environmentalist identity ($\tau = 0.35$ versus $\tau = 0.25$). Unlike the environmentalists, activists reported slightly fewer consumer actions (not significant).

Table 14. Volunteered activist identity cross-tabulated with 1) the groups informants belong to and 2) the actions they participate in. This table does not include the public.

| Volunteered Activist Identity (<i>n</i>) | No. groups | | | | No. actions | | |
|--|------------|---------|----------|-------|-------------|----------|--------|
| | Local | Mail-in | Informal | Total | Civic | Consumer | Total |
| Zero listed (131) | 1.94 | 1.35 | 0.48 | 3.78 | 0.69 | 1.77 | 8.56 |
| One or more listed (12) | 3.25 | 0.75 | 0.33 | 4.33 | 1.75 | 1.671 | 11.00 |
| τ | 0.29 | -0.08 | -0.03 | 0.15 | 0.350 | -0.02 | 0.19 |
| $p \leq$ | 0.0001 | 0.1 | 0.3 | 0.006 | 0.0001 | 0.4 | 0.0008 |

Conclusions

In the introduction of this paper, the dictionary definition of an environmentalist was cited as “a person working to solve environmental problems.” We found multiple meanings for the word, with “action taken” being only one of several criteria. To understand usage of the word among environmentalists themselves, as well as among the U.S.

public, we find that one must distinguish among four distinct categories within Environmentalist₁ (those who care). These four distinct meanings (shown in Table 5c) are: those who care but do not act in the public sphere; conservationists; activists (those taking civic actions); and radical environmentalists.

Without making at least these four distinctions, we find that surveys and ethnographic interviews provide less valid and less predictive data. For example, the Gallup question “Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist?” is answered in the affirmative by 50 percent to 70 percent of the public, and is less predictive of environmental action than other questions we present here. For the scholar of the environmental movement, or actor within it, it is worth sorting out the meanings and ramifications of the identity of “environmentalist,” since we show that this identity, when expressed in more precise words, is correlated with environmental group membership and other environmental actions.

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Notes

¹ We use “term” in what is approximately its common English usage, to refer to what is properly called a “lexeme” in linguistics.

² “Dave” and all personal names given here are pseudonyms; “Sierra Club” and other groups are true names unless noted otherwise; all quotations are verbatim transcripts from audiotapes, with “...” indicating our deletions, and “[]” our added clarifications.

³ For a more comprehensive analysis of how environmental actions varied across group types please see Kitchell et al. (2000).

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