Imagining A Sustainable World:
A Qualitative Analysis of Environmental Cognitive Alternatives

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We would like to respectfully acknowledge that our research was conducted on the unceded traditional territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, Musqueam, and Kwikwetlem Nations.
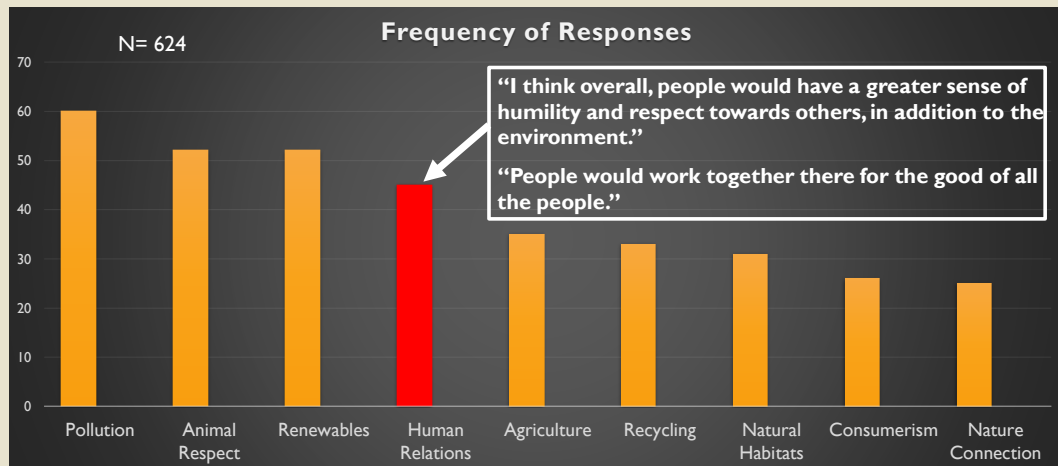
ENVIRONMENTAL COGNITIVE ALTERNATIVES

- **Environmental Cognitive Alternatives** (ECA's for short) refer to ways in which human's relationship to the natural world can be different from the status quo (more sustainable)

- **Research Questions:**
- What do people describe when imagining a sustainable world? (content)
- Are there qualitative differences between what activists and non-activists describe when imagining ECA's

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Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) states that people's willingness to engage in social movements is dependant on their access to cognitive alternatives eg. "How can relations between groups be different?" Environmental cognitive alternatives (ECA's for short) specifically refer to ways in which human's relationship to the natural world can be different (more sustainable). Consistent with this theoretical framework, previous correlational research by Wright et. al (2020) found that access to environmental cognitive alternatives indeed predicted Activist Identification and pro-environmental behaviours. In Wright et. al (2020), the authors measured self reported access to ECA's but didn't examine the specific content of what participants generate themselves.

We intend to build on existing research by examining the content of what people describe when imagining a sustainable world. In addition we are going to examine whether there are qualitative differences between what activists and non-activists describe when imagining ECA's. Other ongoing research in our lab has identified a causal effect of access to cognitive alternatives in predicting pro-environmental behaviour intentions so the present research will hopefully shed some light on how the specific content of people's imagined ECA's predict different levels of engagement in environmental activism.

STUDY 1: FREQUENCY OF OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES COLLECTED BY WRIGHT ET. AL (2020)

Frequency of Responses

N= 624

"I think overall, people would have a greater sense of humility and respect towards others, in addition to the environment."

"People would work together there for the good of all the people."

Pollution | Animal Respect | Renewables | Human Relations | Agriculture | Recycling | Natural Habitats | Consumerism | Nature Connection

To answer our research questions we first examined open-ended responses collected by Wright et al (2020). Participants were asked "Can you imagine a world, different from the current state of our own, in which humans have a harmonious and sustainable relationship with the rest of the natural environment? Describe what that that world would be like. How would that world be different from the world we live in now?" Participants would then write their responses in the designated text boxes on a survey.

Pictured above are the most common open-ended responses from Wright et. al (2020). Of particular note is the frequency in which participants described human relationships when imagining a sustainable world. We find these results interesting because, unlike pollution and renewable energy, human relations are not necessarily as directly linked to mitigating climate change yet for nearly half of the participants, positive human relations were described as an important aspect of their imagined sustainable world. Again, these results provide some nice insight into the content of what people describe when imagining a sustainable. world We would next move on to collecting qualitative data through 30-minute semi-structured interviews which would allow for more in-depth responses from participants and more sophisticated data analysis.

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STUDY 2:
30-MINUTE-SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- **Methods:**

- 11 activist and 11 non-activist undergraduate participants

- participants asked to describe a world in which we have successfully mitigated climate change. Responses were then coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

- **Results**

- Compared to non-activists, activist participants were more comfortable, provided more detail, and described ECA's that were more different from the status quo.

- **Even though activists and non-activists talked about a lot of the same content, activists were more likely to express technological skepticism, describe the need to address inequity (both economic and social), and make explicit connections between various social issues and climate change.**

STUDY 2:
HOW ACTIVIST'S COGNITIVE ALTERNATIVES WERE DIFFERENT FROM NON-ACTIVISTS

EXPRESSING TECHNOLOGICAL SKEPTICISM

"Mhm, yeah I think like for the, the **great climate transition** um, it ha-, it's gon-, has to be, **there has to be a huge technology component to that but I do not think technology is what will save people, I think it is…connection**, and…uh, consumption **and reducing consumption**" A1

MORE LIKELY TO ADDRESS INEQUITY

"…And you can employ people so you address economic issues while also transitioning the economy from like fossil fuel based to like renewable energy um and with that, like within that structure you try to address gender inequity and racial inequity, and all these different intersectionalities of oppression" A1

We'll begin by examining the most common theme that emerged from the qualitative interviews: Technological solutions to environmental problems. This theme was present in nearly every participant's imagined sustainable world and included content such as renewable energy, electrification, and to a lesser extent, carbon capture technology. Activists generally provided more detailed descriptions and a deeper understanding of sustainable energy sources. As evidenced by the above quote, some activists also expressed skepticism regarding a purely technological solution to climate change, which suggests a more nuanced understanding of how technology can be used mitigate climate change. Non activists did not express any technological skepticism; in fact, some non-activists seemingly endorsed a techno-salvation mindset.

Economic changes were similarly described by most participant's but the content of responses again differed between activists and non-activists.
For nearly every activist participant, a sustainable economy would include more income equality, and less systemic racism and oppression. This connection was only made by a few non-activists whereas others described only subtle changes to economy emphasizing the importance of sustained economic growth and the need to incentivize sustainability.

STUDY 2:
HOW ACTIVIST'S COGNITIVE ALTERNATIVES WERE DIFFERENT FROM NON-ACTIVISTS

INFLUENCE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

"I think just like in the perfect, ideal world scenario, there would be more Indigenous values applied. There would be more Indigenous leaders that are listened to, and their values" A6

EXPLICITLY CONNECTING ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

"I think you, just, you cannot properly address climate change without addressing like social inequity on the planet or the greater idea of like ecological collapse" A1

Continuing with the theme of social justice, it was exclusively activist participants who described changes in Indigenous influence and leadership. In many activist's imagined sustainable world, Indigenous people are respected, listened to, and hold meaningful positions of power.

Similar to the other social justice related content, it was generally activists who explicitly formed connections between social justice and environmental issues, believing that mitigating climate change will require progress in these other areas.

STUDY 2:
HETEROGENEITY IN HOW ACTIVISTS INTERPRET THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY AND OTHER SOCIAL ISSUES

[In describing the climate march] **"we started a chant like yeah, climate justice and all things. Then they started to chant migrant rights. And I stopped. It is like yeah I get it. It is a very important question but like stop. Because what you are doing then you are making a question of politics again. And you like pointing at towards one like kind of political agenda. That should not be the thing. We should have, we should have** uh, **socialists and conservatives and liberals and every, whatever. Everyone should be focusing on this together." A9**

Interestingly, there were a few activists who felt that social justice and environmental issues should be kept separate, justifying their concern through a belief that conflating different social issues could alienate potential allies.

What is important to note is that this participant isn't saying that social justice issues aren't important. They simply do not envision progress in social issues as an important aspect of mitigating climate change and achieving a sustainable world. Therefore the desire to focus exclusively on climate related issues is a strategic decision rather than an outright opposition to addressing social issues.

This finding suggests that even when people describe sustainable worlds with similar features to each other they may have significantly different ideas in how to reach them.

SUMMARY

Activist's cognitive alternatives:
- Clearer with more detail
- Expressed technological skepticism
- Described a more equitable world
- Explicitly connected various social issues with climate change

- A few activist participants were opposed to connecting sustainability with social justice issues

- Future research should explore where differences in approach come from (prioritizing social justice or not) and examine which approach is the most effective

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Thank you for checking out our poster! Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

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Sustainability, Identity & Social Change Lab at Simon Fraser University

If you are interested in this research, please check our lab's recent publications.

Mackay, C.M.L., Schmitt, M.T., Lutz, A.E., & Mendel, J. (2021). Recent Developments in the Social Identity Approach to the Psychology of Climate Change. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 42,* 95-101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.04.009

Wright, J.D., & Schmitt, M.T., Mackay, C.M.L., & Neufeld, S.D. (2020). Imagining a sustainable world: Measuring cognitive alternatives to the environmental status quo. *Journal of Environmental Psychology.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2020.101523