

Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future – Topical Lunch Summary Report

Title: Identity and Sustainability Engagement

Organizer: Jonathon Schuldt

Date: October 19, 2015

Attendees:

Anindita Banerjee, Panle Barwick, Susanee Bruyere, Nina Chaopricha, Howard Chong, Janis Dickinson, Frank DiSalvo, Gustavo Flores-Macias, Ying Hua, Graham Kerslick, Bruce Monger, Sarah Naiman, Jessica Nolan, Adam Pearson, Gregory Poe, Simone Pulver, Aaron Sachs, Jonathon Schuldt, Wendy Wolford

Brief Summary:

In this age of social media, people appear to wear their identities on their sleeves—from Facebook to live tweeting during presidential debates, we have grown accustomed to making our various social, cultural, and political identities clear. But how are these identities related to our engagement with environmental and sustainability issues? Perspectives from across the social sciences and humanities suggest that individuals' engagement on sustainability issues is shaped in part by a motivation to express core aspects of one's identity and to signal a connection to meaningful social groups. What are the different ways that climate and sustainability scholars conceptualize identity, and how can the concept be used to better understand and promote engagement with sustainability issues across diverse social groups? This topical lunch aims to bring together scholars from different disciplines to advance the conversation about the role of identity factors in sustainability engagement and to identify key areas ripe for further inquiry.

Specifically, the presentation overviewed what we are calling the attitude-action gap on sustainability engagement, whereby certain minority groups in the U.S., namely Hispanics and Latinos, report strong pro-environmental attitudes and yet are underrepresented in mainstream environmental organizations and are less likely to identify as “environmentalists,” compared to Whites. Discussion focused on gathering suggestions for an upcoming nationally representative opinion survey that aims to investigate some of these social-identity conduits and barriers to environmental engagement.

Selected Participants' Comments:

To what extent is the survey finding that minorities' opinions about climate change are less politically polarized a climate-specific phenomenon (as opposed to any other political issue)?

The planned national survey should examine how climate-related attitudes (e.g., of Hispanics and Latinos) change during the acculturation process.

Are there different levels of socially desirable survey responding across different racial/ethnic groups that could contribute to apparent differences in public opinion?

There is a large related literature on identity and social movements/organization in the sociological literature that could be incorporated.

Ideally, the survey would involve an oversample of key demographic groups (e.g., Hispanics/Latinos) to ensure the ability to examine within-group differences in climate and sustainability-related attitudes and opinions (for example, between groups living in southern CA and southern FL).

What does it mean to be an “environmentalist” within different communities throughout the U.S.? There is value in shedding light on the different conceptions/stereotypes that people hold with this term.