

Identity and Environmental Action Laboratory

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy
Unit of Culture Research
Tel Aviv University
rakefet@post.tau.ac.il

Introduction

Global environmental problems are rooted in concrete local community practices. While the need for socio-cultural change towards a sustainable lifestyle in a modernizing world has long been recognized, knowledge about the interaction between environment and cultural factors is lacking. Efforts towards environmental legislation and policy face problems of implementing technologies and regulations in diverse social settings, where the limited power of well-planned initiatives from above is revealed. Moreover, far from being a unified agenda, environmentalism is an umbrella concept for a complex of varied, often conflicting, worldviews and moral visions, plans and action strategies. All in all, although recent decades have witnessed the growth of environmental organizations and education programs, it has become evident that so far the environmental movement has been “less than effective in changing attitudes, lifestyles and social structures that constitute the environmentally damaging consequences of contemporary society” (Haluza-DeLay 2008).

In the academy, despite the growing awareness that environmentalism has everything to do with society and culture, environmental research and education still mainly concentrates on science and technology. Similarly, studies in environmental sociology and economics mostly focus on top-down policies of large-scale actors such as the state, corporations, professional bodies or the media. Yet, we still know little about the complex motives and socio-cultural resources of the target communities, which constrain or encourage their receptiveness to environmental attitudes and action. While an environmental discourse is now widespread, a study of the human factor at the grassroots level of socially-creative forms of adopting, rejecting, transforming and generating local environmentalism is still needed.

The laboratory addresses this need, aiming to contribute to our knowledge of the interaction between environmental movement and culture change, through researching both activist groups and target communities, and the interface between these communities and amateur or professional mediators. It also aims at facilitating the use of this knowledge at the service of environmental organizations and education programs for promoting community environmentalism in Israel.

The role of identity in environmental action and social change

In recent decades, the environmental movement has gained considerable presence in Israel, with hundreds to thousands large- and small-scale organizations and activist groups on both the national and local levels. In many cases this action, intended to create social change, is oriented towards empowerment of disempowered (peripheral, ethnic, guest-worker) communities. Formal and informal environmental education programs, targeting

school children and adolescents, are also rife. Despite their variety, as a rule, these activities and programs proceed from values and ethics designed according to Western models of civil society. In the reality of the different local communities, however, many of these initiatives are experienced as short lived and fail to solve cultural misunderstandings and inequalities, to create trust and mobilize to action. Similarly, evaluation surveys of environmental literacy, which use quantitative methods, often reveal (and fail to account for) incongruities between respondents' reported formal knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral patterns.

Against this unsatisfactory background, questions of identity and culture have increasingly become central. *Culture*-oriented theorist move away from focusing on instrumental tactics and effectiveness of social movements and from understanding them as rationally mobilized to specific causes and contentions. Instead, they view these movements as social spaces within which *cultural competence* – knowledge, skills and ethics – are framed, learned and maintained, as part of the participants' identities. In this view, the cultural encounter between activist groups and local communities becomes crucial for assessing the prospect of social change. Proceeding from this view, qualitative research has been developed in certain fields targeting community life, such as education, public health or community psychology, as well as environmental action. This kind of research aims at a deeper understanding of the social worlds and cultural repertoires available to individuals and groups, so as to identify how the relevant practices (such as health services or environmental behavior) may be valued and fit in their life. It is also used to explore the motives and cultural resources of the activist groups. Further, it allows for examining the relationships and knowledge transmission between mediators (such as representatives of organizations or governance, semi-professional volunteers, formal and informal teachers and instructors) and target communities. In this context, reflective action research is sometimes conducted by activist to investigate problems and seek solutions.

In Israel, however, this line of research is currently under-developed. Through the laboratory we aim to use a rich theoretical base combined with fieldwork to investigate the cultural models and identity work of both *activist groups* and their *target communities*. This research consists of collecting complex information to reconstruct the implicit local knowledge, stock of self images and their attached cultural capital, as well as social networks, organization patterns and relationships between laymen and professional activists, all of which determine the mode and pace of change in the particular social spaces.

The Identity and Environmental Action Laboratory

The laboratory structure, which combines theoretical learning and fieldwork, fits the two-fold goal of creating an academic framework for empirical qualitative research into grassroots environmentalism, and giving students the opportunity of applying their academic training in practical work outside the university. This framework responds to the demand of students for studying the human factor in environmental processes, and social change in general. In particular, it responds to the growing awareness of this need by students of the Porter School of Environmental Studies (PSES) at TAU who are themselves field activists. Experience shows that organizations suffer from rapid burnout, with individuals tending to leave or move up quickly to macro-scale political and organization activities,

which fact complicates and obscures the transmission of knowledge accumulated by them. The laboratory framework aims at providing organizations and student-activists with tools for reflectively assessing their own and others' work and for a longer-term effective community work and accumulation of knowledge. At the same time, it serves the purpose of advancing the use of elaborate qualitative methodology, applying interdisciplinary approaches, from in-depth interviewing and narrative research to participatory observation or archival work, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and especially in environmental sociology and history within PSES.

The focus theme of the laboratory is thus **the environmental movement as a context of identity formation and social change**. This perspective gives the laboratory a broad scope for researching many forms of environmental action in both Jewish and non-Jewish communities, from specific local protest campaigns to enduring community routines. It promotes studies on the dynamics of small environmental groups and activists' trajectories, the cultural resources and normative systems of target communities, and the interaction between environmental mediators and local communities. Each year students will be divided into groups and each group will conduct an in-depth study of a single case; Part of these studies will deal with *failed* cases, assuming that unsuccessful attempts are no less revealing of culture dynamics than successful ones.

The objectives of the laboratory are:

- **Annually** – to conduct case studies to accumulate knowledge about environmental grassroots processes, in single-site and comparative perspective, and design community-based action research.
- **Medium term** – to revisit and evaluate the studied projects and their outcomes several years later, and draw comparative conclusions over time.
- **Long term** – to create a digital audio library of the large corpus of recorded narratives that will be accumulated by interview-based studies; this library may be later put to use for further investigation into other aspects of the Israeli environmental movement.

Students will be supervised by the academic director of the laboratory, who will teach the theoretical-methodological seminar, and part-time supervisors/assistants, trained in Culture Research and Environmental Sociology. The latter will also be responsible for the coordination of specific projects, including contacts with the studied groups, timelines of presentations and submission of project reports, and later also for managing the planned audio library.

Work plan

The laboratory's envisaged work plan proceeds in the following stages:

1. During the first academic term the laboratory team (students and supervisors) will meet weekly for a 4 hours seminar, in the framework of which individual case studies will be designed and assigned to the student groups, pilot studies will be conducted and reviewed by the team.
2. The second academic term will be dedicated to completing fieldworks, during which process each projects' interim findings and analyses will be presented to the

team; concluding the individual analyses and writing final papers; and working out a draft for a comparative projects-evaluation report.

Each team will work over the course of a whole academic years; the project will culminate in a symposium for presenting the research papers. The laboratory will maintain cooperation with environmental organizations and associations (several organization representatives have already expressed interest in this project) to facilitate dissemination of accumulated knowledge, as well as links with similar academic research projects abroad, for exchange of knowledge and experience.

Target students

The laboratory is intended for graduate students at the TAU Unit of Culture Research as well as the Porter School of Environmental Studies, and is also open to graduate students at the Social Sciences and the Humanities, all of whom with a basic prerequisite in culture research or cultural sociology/anthropology. Student who will wish to write their theses in the framework of the laboratory will be requested to complete 4-6 credit hours in Culture Research and Environmental Studies respectively.