‘Disgusted with what’s happening to my home – Planet Earth’:

Young Australians’ attitudes to the environment

Carol Gilligan (1982) argues that females approach moral dilemmas via an ‘ethic of care’ as opposed to males’ abstract justice approach. My research, based on an Australian Research Council funded survey of 1000 young Australians, suggests that males and females are equally likely to value environmental preservation in terms of ‘caring’ or ‘protecting’, although there are gender differences in the deployment of other approaches or vocabularies (in particular a commitment to economic development is favoured more by young men and an inter-generational duty to preserve the environment is favoured more by young women). Furthermore, due to the weight of the individualist neoliberal discourse, young Australians are more likely to express care for the environment than for vulnerable humans.

Biography

Chilla Bulbeck was appointed to the foundation chair of women's studies at Adelaide University in 1997. Her research focus on gender and the differences of nationality, race/ethnicity, class and generation, has been published in a number of books, for example Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women’s Diversity in a Post-Colonial World (Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Sex, Love and Feminism in the Asia Pacific: A Cross-cultural Study of Young People’s Attitudes (Routledge, 2008). This paper draws on arguments from a recent book: Facing the Wild: Ecotourism, Conservation and Animal Encounters (Earthscan, 2005).
Introduction

Adrian Franklin (1999: 3,194) argues that many humans in today’s world find it easier to love animals than humans, seeing our own species as destructive, pestilent, mad, and out of control. Animals and the planet are essentially innocent victims of a greedy global economy. Carol Gilligan (1982) described a particularly female response to moral dilemmas as the ‘ethic of care’, or connection with others, rather than the male ‘ethic of justice’. Environmental organisations certainly play upon this ‘ethic of care’ when they urge supporters to ‘befriend’, ‘adopt’ or give a ‘home’ to wild animals (Milton 2002: 124-8). My research on young Australians’ gendered deployment of vocabularies in response to environmental issues finds that there is little evidence of a gendered difference in the deployment of the ethic of care.

Method

The analysis is based on a questionnaire administered to 1000 young people (and 230 of their parents) between 2000 and 2007 across four states (South Australia made up 53 per cent of the sample, Western Australia 25 per cent, New South Wales 12 per cent and Victoria 10 per cent). The focus was year 11 and 12 high school students (59 per cent of the sample) sampled across the spectrum from elite private to working class government schools, located in capital cities and in regional centres. The majority of questionnaires were completed at school in a single class period. The students took a near identical questionnaire home to their parents to complete and post back to me (19 per cent of the sample). Given the ‘anti-elitist’ attack on university-educated left-leaning attitudes (e.g. see Sawer and Hindess 2004), I surveyed a group of young ‘cosmopolitans’ (e.g. see Simons 2005 for a discussion of their different attitudes to social issues), first year university students studying women’s studies or social sciences (12 per cent of the sample, women’s studies chosen both for convenience and to gauge its impact on attitudes to gender issues). The other major category I sought was early school leavers, secured as clients of youth services for unemployed and marginalized youth and for Aboriginal youth. Because some of my questions concerned sexuality
issues, I also sought responses from clients of youth services for young people with sexuality issues (10 per cent of the sample).

Within each of these categories the actual school or university classes or youth services secured was a matter of convenience, a combination of my personal contacts and the willingness of a school principal or youth service director and then class teacher or youth service worker to give me access to their students and clients. Given that much of the questionnaire concerned gender issues, females were more willing than males to engage in the voluntary aspects of the research. Thus 57 per cent of the high school students were female, 58 per cent of the youth service clients (and 85 per cent of the university students - due to sampling women’s studies classes), but 74 per cent of the parents and 80 per cent of the young people who chose to be interviewed were female. While some teachers participated as a favour to me or to a friend or acquaintance, most put their classes at my disposal because their school or they themselves had an interest in social justice. The students were likely to have been exposed to such issues, skewing support for and understanding of them (see McLeod and Yates 2006:143-158, esp 153 for a discussion of the impact of the social justice curriculum in different schools on students’ attitudes). While these samples are likely to be more socially progressive than a random sample of young Australians, the spread of schools and responses suggests that my research captured the full range of attitudes, and it is these that are of more interest than the numerical attitude scores.

The questionnaire asked for respondents’ opinions on a four point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) plus a ‘no opinion/don’t know’ option in relation to a number of gender and other social issues. After each question there was room to make comments. The school students and youth service clients were also asked to write an essay imagining their life from the vantage point of being 70 or 80 years old, while 150 follow-up interviews were completed with those indicating willingness on the questionnaire. Only the interviewed students provided a name or pseudonym,
and are so identified in extracts below, while comments from the questionnaires are identified only by gender and respondent category.

Adapting Pilcher’s (1998) notion of ‘gender vocabularies’, I coded the questionnaire comments into ‘social contract vocabularies’, coding and recoding as I refined the vocabularies and until almost all the comments had been attributed to a vocabulary. Although ‘vocabularies’ are somewhat akin to discourses in Foucault’s terms, explicating how respondents claim to speak ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ (e.g. see Whittaker 2000: 7), the more pedestrian approach deployed here draws on the idea of frames: ‘mental structures that shape the way we see the world’ (Lakoff 2004: 1).

Results

There is high support for environmentally sustainable industrial development, although this is tempered somewhat when respondents are asked to balance jobs against the environment (compare Tables 1 and 2). While there are limited gender differences in these levels of support, the vocabularies used to explain the responses do show gender differences (see Chart 1).

In an apparent prefiguring of their future imagined roles as either primary breadwinners or nurturers, young women endorse the responsibility towards future generations and young men endorse economic progress. Young women claim: ‘we should preserve our beautiful environment for future generations to enjoy’; ‘our environment needs to be cared for, or the future of our children and our grandchildren will be in jeopardy’. Young men express responsibility in the more limited coinage of endorsing social security payments for the unemployed. ‘Growth’, equated with ‘progress’, is all-important and all-consuming for some male respondents: ‘without people or progress there’s not much point in having an environment’; ‘we as Australians must grow and expand’. The focus for
these young men is ‘development’ rather than ‘sustainable’, one of the respondents supporting environmental preservation, but ‘not at the loss to Australia’s way of life’.

Some respondents acknowledged the dominance of economic progress in Australia’s political rhetoric (e.g. see Bean et al 2004):

Our ecosystem is deteriorating, our forests dissolving away, our reefs dying before our eye, endangered species becoming extinct in a blink of the eye. All because of human interest “Self-beneficial” – we need to stop worrying about our profit margin and start worrying about the land we live on (male, Protestant high school student).

gasp, but what would it do to the economy. … What is more important than treasuring and developing what we need to keep us on this planet alive? Progress I think not. On the other hand, industrial development could be used to further sustain the environment (male, university student).

The second of these young men, in particular, wonders if industrial development could preserve the environment, in stark contrast with Anne’s stern rejection of materialism:

I would work tirelessly to find better ways of treating the environment and more sustainable practices. In my spare time I would paint and play the guitar. After uni I would buy a small bit of land, plant lots of native trees and build a small stone hut where I would live with my dog, my goat and my duck. I would campaign for organisations like Greenpeace and WWF and devote my time to educating people about the environment. I would have little time for relationships, especially children although looking back I wish I had had a daughter, maybe
I will have. She will share my beliefs because I will raise her to see that they are good beliefs, she will be her own person though. She will respect me, herself, others and the environment. My life will have been hard, people will have not always seen or shared my beliefs and that will be hard for me. I will always work towards a better planet and future for not only my daughter but for every living thing on the planet. To the day I die I will live in my hut in the bush (Anne, Protestant high school student, essay extract).

Indeed, few joined Anne in this consumerist denial, as Chart 1 reveals, the claim that humans need the environment for our survival being more favoured.

While Gilligan’s (1982) ‘ethic of care’ is more characteristic of females, Gilligan (1982:100) found that young men and women were capable of both justice and care approaches. My results, in which young men and young women seem equally comfortable with the care ethic, are not then so surprising. Young men were more likely to urge ‘protecting’ and ‘conserving’ the environment, while young women spoke of ‘caring’, ‘looking after’, ‘preserving’ and ‘keeping’ the environment. The environment - described as ‘unique’, ‘sacred’, ‘beautiful’, ‘intricate’ (females), or ‘precious’ (male) - is our ‘dying’ (male), ‘sick’ mother earth (male). It must be ‘treasured’ (two males) and ‘cherished’ (female).

A number of comments contrasted the innocent and exposed environment, which ‘cannot fend for itself’ (two females), with the destruction of pestilent humanity, ‘raping’ or ‘killing’ the ‘dying’ planet (two females, one male):

Disgusted with what’s happening to my home – Planet Earth (male, Catholic high school student)
man has brought this pox upon itself. Leave the environment out of it (male, Catholic high school student)

We have to look after our planet. Human life is a parasite, all we’re doing is feeding off mother nature without giving back. That needs to change (male, sexuality service client)

While young men and women were equally likely to express the ethic of care in relation to the environment, far fewer of them expressed an ethic of care for any vulnerable humans, for example those in poverty. Aboriginal families disrupted by the policies of removal, or migrants attempting a new life in Australia (see Chart 2). This appears to support Franklin’s (1999) claim concerning contemporary misanthropy, except that respondents were more likely to identify with migrants or the poor than the environment in an expression of universal humanity (see Chart 3). To some extent, such empathy was invited by the phrasing of these two questionnaire items – one declaring that migrants should receive equal welfare benefits and the other implying that no-one should live in poverty. However, given the extensive public discussion concerning non-Indigenous Australians’ obligation to say ‘sorry’, I would have thought that empathetic connection was available in relation to this questionnaire item. Rather, the empathic identification with migrants and those facing poverty was, at least in some cases, built on the respondent being in the same boat. For example, 57 per cent of those articulating a common humanity as justification for equal social security for migrants are themselves from recently migrated families (compared with 30 per cent of the total sample). Both Australian and overseas-born respondents borrow the rhetoric of multiculturalism to encourage recognition of people from different ethnic backgrounds as equally human: ‘we are all human’, ‘we are all people’, ‘we are all immigrants’, ‘this is their home’ too.

Charts 2 and 3 in about here

The claim to universal humanity has been dramatically undercut, but not extinguished, by the
Howard government’s condemnation of ‘illegal refugees’, expressed in one-third of the young people’s comments on this item. In rejecting poverty, the major empathetic assertion was that ‘no-one deserves to live in poverty’ (‘would you like to be poor?’, ‘people who don’t care should be treated like that’), several extending this claim with concrete examples: ‘I believe everyone should be able to live in warmth and be able to eat proper meals instead of living on the streets’. Only two of the 23 commenting in relation to this issue expressed empathy based explicitly on their own experience of living on social security. On the other hand, a quarter of the respondents undercut their apparent endorsement of universal humanity with riders such as ‘no one should be a dole bludger’, ‘most of these people are alcoholic’, some don’t ‘work hard’ or ‘don’t take care of their home or money’.

Empathetic connection with the environment is a larger leap than identifying a common humanity, and one taken by young women more so than young men (as compared with the items just discussed where young men are more likely to make the connection, I suspect because most of these items express economic independence: see Chart 3). This handful of respondents averred ‘our land is part of who we are’; ‘we would be damaging ourselves’ or:

It’s really egotistical of the human race to grant themselves the importance and right to just kill the planet because it gives humans some short-term advantage. We are a part of the planet, not owners of it; humans are not necessarily better than anything else on the planet (Kathryn, government high school student).

Leila also dissolved the me-it distinction between humans and the environment:

humans and the planet are one thing, you know. We have sort of separated that and made it as though we rule the planet but we should be taking care of what we have been given (‘Leila’, Protestant high school).
Conclusion: all talk and no action?

I’ve been a world famous artist and ended hunger, made world peace and love. I’ve also stopped environmental change, saved all world wildlife. I am an Olympic gold medallist for weight lifting and Volleyball. Etc (female, Protestant high school student).

Despite their high support for preserving the environment, as with the population at large (e.g. see Bean et al 2004; Passey and Lyons 2005:68), few respondents were actually engaged in environmental activism at the time of writing their essays or imagined lives of such engagement. The essayist extracted above writes somewhat tongue-in-cheek, and Anne, quoted earlier living in her hut in the bush, is rare in her commitment to environmentalism. Kate suggested that her decision to join the World Wide Fund for Nature and Greenpeace may have grown out of ‘caring about’ and ‘respecting’ animals. It is intriguing that ‘caring about’ animals or the environment came more easily to young women and men than caring for other human beings.

References


Table 1: ‘Industrial development in Australia should be limited to what is environmentally sustainable, that is to what can be done without damaging the environment’ x sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young women</th>
<th>Young men</th>
<th>Young people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree (agree strongly + agree more than disagree)</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree more than agree</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion/don’t know</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>914</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* note: this question was not answered by the youth service clients

Table 2: ‘Jobs for the unemployed are more important than preserving the environment’ x sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young women</th>
<th>Young men</th>
<th>Young people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree more than disagree</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree (disagree strongly + disagree more than agree)</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion/don’t know</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>977</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the 65 youth service clients in South Australia, the question was ‘Do you think jobs for the unemployed are more important than saving the environment?’ and the responses were limited to ‘yes’ (coded as agree more than disagree), ‘no’ (coded as disagree more than agree), and ‘don’t know’ (coded as no opinion/don’t know).
Chart 1: Major vocabularies used by young people in comments on environment issues

- **females - jobs vs envt**
  - anti-materialist
  - care ethic - empathy with envt, unemployed
  - care ethic - we care for envt
  - economic - progress
  - economic - preserve envt for economy
  - responsibility - duty to others, esp. future generations
  - responsibility - endorses social security

- **males - sustainable devt**
  - anti-materialist
  - care ethic - we care for envt
  - care ethic - empathy with envt, unemployed
  - economic - progress
  - economic - preserve envt for economy
  - responsibility - duty to others, esp. future generations
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  - economic - progress
  - economic - preserve envt for economy
  - responsibility - duty to others, esp. future generations
  - responsibility - endorses social security
Chart 2: Percentage of young people using ‘we care for them’ discourse x gender

- Good schools, hospitals and social security are more important than low taxes
- Social security should be paid to avoid poverty
- Migrants should receive equal welfare benefits
- Multiculturalism
- Unions are important because they protect workers
- Jobs are more important than preserving environment
- Sustainable industrial development
- Aborigines should receive land rights or compensation
- PM should say sorry for stolen generations

Chart 3: Percentage of young people using empathetic ‘we are like them’ discourse x gender

- Good schools, hospitals and social security are more important than low taxes
- Social security should be paid to avoid poverty
- Migrants should receive equal welfare benefits
- Multiculturalism
- Unions are important because they protect workers
- Jobs are more important than preserving environment
- Sustainable industrial development
- Aborigines should receive land rights or compensation
- PM should say sorry for stolen generations