



Introduction: the value of environmental disagreement

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Abstract

Disagreement is all around us. Could we approach environmental disagreement not as a threat but as a resource? The essays in this Symposium offer insights into working with difference; several come from a series of related paper sessions held at the Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences annual conference in June 2017 and 2018. Identity politics, and resultant identity-based insularity separating social groups, may help us appreciate the origin and intensity of such disagreement, in that identity seems to be more important to social factions than differing policy positions on issues. The five essays here address difference and disagreement with an emphasis on theory, methodology, and/or pedagogy, and point to similar efforts which may offer creative paths to explore the value of environmental disagreement.

Keywords Disagreement · Difference · Conflict · Identity · Engagement

Disagreement as a reality—and a resource

We live in a world where it feels as if social and political consensus toward environmental progress is impossible—that difference and disagreement are all around us, certainly in the battle-hyped, Trump-era US where this Symposium's contributors reside. Among those in the environmental community, disagreement may understandably yield feelings of frustration, disillusionment, and even hopelessness. But read on: this special series of essays explores how difference could become a potential strength to environmental scholars, students, and activists.

One may reasonably challenge this assumption that the environmental arena is governed more by conflict than consensus. In the context of the US, polls seem to indicate general support for environmental protection and stronger climate policy (Funk et al. 2018; Langer Research Associates 2019)—let alone the overwhelming scientific consensus over anthropogenic climate change (Cook et al. 2016). Yet related polls suggest that our fractured American political system has also fractured environmental consensus, e.g., in climate attitudes among Republicans vs. Democrats (Funk et al. 2018). And when environmental issues are prioritized relative to other

issues, political divisions have resulted in bigger and bigger differences over time (Jones 2019), with environmental issues now ranking far lower among Republicans vs. Democrats.

There is, one need not be reminded, a larger landscape of disagreement and conflict in the US. Its more troubling elements, as witnessed among battles between the two major political parties, have reached toxic proportions. As one sample study, disagreement can sometimes reach the level of “lethal mass partisanship” which, though it has existed for years, displays disturbing (though minority) proportions of recent adherents (Kalmoe and Mason 2019; cf. Edsall 2019).

What to do? Many in the environmental community, disillusioned with the seeming impossibility of consensus and troubled by the recent unraveling of environmental protection, take this current reality as a mandate to fight—to work in solidarity with their base of supporters in opposition to the rounds of weakened environmental regulations and accelerated environmental damages they see around them (e.g., Popovich et al. 2019). This alternative undergirds actions such as environmental protests, which address disagreement not by striving to find a common voice but by making sure their particular voice is heard, and exerting political pressure toward their desired ends.

There may, however, be a third way beyond ready consensus and inevitable conflict. The contributors to this Symposium appreciate the importance of working for consensus on environmental priorities, or the very different option of fighting for environmental protection, yet collectively approach disagreement as a potential resource in the

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environmental studies and sciences (ESS) classroom, in our scholarship, and in today's world. How exactly disagreement would work in these venues is a matter for the ensuing essays to clarify in their respective ways; but all proceed by not wishing for naïve consensus not assuming conflict as intractable. There may be a value to disagreement that acknowledges difference while collectively moving forward on the issues of environment about which we care so deeply.

Disagreement, identity, and insularity

It may be helpful to reflect briefly on the causes underlying the toxic disagreement around us today. There are likely many: we have all heard, for instance, how social media have amplified disagreement via the creation of insular digital networks (e.g., Lupton 2014; Fuchs 2017). More fundamentally, one key driver may be *identity*: not just what we believe (e.g., regarding environmental issues), but *who we are*. Though not typically woven into issues of environment, social identity plays a pivotal role across the right/left political spectrum, and is thus worth our attention in appreciating both the constraints and possibilities of democratically grounded action (Achen and Bartels 2017; Klein 2020).

Whether cultivated via direct or mediated (e.g., digital) relationships, identity can reinforce particular beliefs, reproduce networks of trust/distrust, and even remove barriers to actions we otherwise would decry. As the authors of the above study on lethal mass partisanship claim, “party identity strength” is a major correlate with support for violence against members of the other party; in other words, the more one identifies in the US as a Republican or Democrat, the less they are willing to care about harms suffered by members of the other party, and the more they support threats and even physical violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2019).

A more extended study distinguishes between issue- and identity-based ideology and its effects on polarization in the US (Mason 2018), looking less at political party affiliation and more at ideological affiliation as liberal or conservative. Citing a wealth of other studies, Mason suggests that “affective polarization is particularly driven by social identities (more powerfully than by issue positions) because social identities have repeatedly been found to generate in group privilege and outgroup derogation” (p. 870). In other words, toxic disagreement may erroneously appear to be based on major differences over issues, whereas in fact ideological positions such as liberal or conservative may be more about differences over identification. As the study concludes:

Identity-based ideology can drive affective ideological polarization even when individuals are naïve about policy. The passion and prejudice with which we approach politics is driven not only by what we think, but also powerfully by who we think we are (p. 885).

“Identity politics” is often mentioned in popular media as a driver of contemporary conflict: online searches for this phrase spiked tremendously around the time of the 2016 Trump presidential election, and have consistently grown since.¹ The field of identity politics, however, predates President Trump and the current American predicament, stretching back at least three decades (Bernstein 2005; Heyes 2018). These reviews suggest that the term is malleable, leading to multiple uses and variable critique. To some, identity politics as a positive notion is built on the reality of oppression of marginalized social groups (e.g., women or Native Americans); to others, identity politics as a negative notion reflects misperceptions among powerful social groups (e.g., whites) that they are supposedly oppressed. Perhaps the malleability of this term suggests its ubiquity across the right/left political spectrum and resultant significance today: many people in the US are fighting for their identities, whether rightly or wrongly, and the overall effect is one of siloing, insularity, and toxic disagreement.

The insularity effects of identity have been explored in one highly-cited work, *The Big Sort* (Bishop 2009). Bishop uses county-scale presidential election data from the last several decades to argue that Americans are increasingly living in like-minded neighborhoods—a form of micro-geographical identity, and a spatially literal insularity. *Big Sort* has received mixed reviews (Abrams and Fiorina 2012; Johnston et al. 2016; Florida 2016), but it points to how identity, insularity, and toxic disagreement may relate via our social networks—those with whom we regularly interact. Whether by identity-based neighborhoods or other identity-based affiliations, we tend to feel, believe, and act in the context of particular social networks that may be quite homogeneous in certain respects. Identity can then result in an echo chamber effect, heightening solidarity with one's own (in group) and feelings of radical difference from, even hostility toward, perceived outgroups. A related work, *The Vanishing Neighbor* (Dunkelman 2014), contends that these lost ties across difference in one's community once constituted a vital “middle ring” between intimate relationships such as family, and instrumentally significant (e.g., economic or political) distant relationships. Without this middle ring, our social networks—both intimate and distant—fail to afford us the learning opportunity of experiencing, and working through, difference, and disagreement.

We in the ESS community must be aware of our own potential insularity (Proctor et al. 2018). Our social identities and networks of solidarity may not help address—in fact, could well exacerbate—the larger landscape of toxic disagreement we see around us. This concern applies as well to the ESS learning environment and classroom. There is, however, a way out of insularity, as we expand our scholarly, educational,

¹ From Google Trends “identity politics” search from 2004 to the present: see trends.google.com.

and personal social networks and come face to face with difference. It is in this spirit of reaching out and expanding our circle that these five contributed essays offer insights into the potential value of environmental disagreement.

Theorizing, measuring, and teaching disagreement

The five essays that follow in this Symposium address environmental disagreement in various ways: its conceptual foundations, methodological challenges, and pedagogical strategies. Several arose in initial form via a series of sessions held as part of Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences (AESS) annual conferences, first in Tucson Arizona in June 2017 (“Engaging Many Shades of Green in Challenging Times: Theory and Research”), then in Washington D.C. in June 2018 (“EcoTypes: Environmental Ideas, Inclusion, and Engagement”). These sessions voiced our collective concern for effective engagement across difference in the times we have been living through in the US, bringing together theory, empirical research, and teaching to bear upon the issues of difference, disagreement, and debate our ESS students face in their scholarship and daily lives.

The essay by Emma Brush, “Inconvenient Truths: Pluralism, Pragmatism, and the Need for Civil Disagreement,” is presented first to sketch a philosophical basis for the value of disagreement. Brush looks to environmental pragmatism as initial inspiration for how to work with pluralism, yet worries that it too readily assumes the possibility of consensus; instead, Brush reaches back to the longstanding roots of American pragmatism to emphasize civil disagreement as vital to democracy, thus difference as “... not a problem to be solved, but a tool to be used.”

Once the value of environmental disagreement has been theorized, it is important to clarify exactly what sort of environmental disagreement and difference exists. This could be achieved in part via quantitative surveys, but not without difficulties, as suggested in the second essay by Jennifer Bernstein, “(Dis)agreement Over What? The Challenge of Quantifying Environmental Worldviews.” Bernstein focuses in particular on the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) scale, developed roughly four decades ago and still used in spite of all that has changed in the context of environmental diversity. Bernstein concludes: “Our challenge as academics is to not rest on our laurels as scales such as the NEP become increasingly dated, but to challenge our ways of thinking to quantify an increasingly dynamic movement.”

My essay, “EcoTypes: Exploring Environmental Ideas, Discovering Deep Difference,” comes third. The EcoTypes initiative has, since early 2017, served as a research project and learning resource among US environmental undergraduates; I summarize both. Though nominally students explore and clarify their environmental ideas via the EcoTypes survey and online resources, ultimately the aim is to discover, and

engage across, deep difference: “an acknowledgement that environmental disagreements are more than mere matters of preference, that they also reflect the genuine contradictions we face in grappling with environmental issues.”

In the next essay, “The Role of EcoTypes in Engagement Across Difference,” Susan Caplow reflects on the EcoTypes survey in her classroom at University of Montevallo in Alabama: “EcoTypes can be used to move populations away from their initial perceptions of each other as ‘for’ or ‘against’ environmentalism toward more nuanced understandings of diverse environmental ideas.” Caplow then develops a 2 × 2 matrix based on preconceived vs. resultant (following EcoTypes) similarity or difference to suggest a variety of discoveries students could make, ultimately arguing that “A policy of engagement can help environmental action be expansive as opposed to reductive, both in terms of people and ideas.”

The final essay by Mark Neff and Zander Albertson, “Does Higher Education Prepare Students to Bridge Divides in Today’s Democracy?,” further applies the initial essays to the context of undergraduate education. Neff and Albertson describe the need for university instructors and administrators to critically evaluate the curricula and structures of higher education, in order to ensure that students are exposed to people who think differently. To identify and foster opportunities for engagement across these differences, the authors offer an assessment tool, the Policy Orientation Survey. They conclude: “Serving our students well requires that we support them as we provide exposure to and practice communicating across the myriad policy orientations that are present within our pluralistic society.”

Next steps: Building on disagreement

Our 2017 and 2018 AESS conference sessions were well attended; there is apparently a felt need for what to do with the disagreement we discover all around us. We trust that these essays serve this felt need, but we are under few illusions: dealing with disagreement is a large, fragile undertaking, even in our relatively controlled environment of the ESS undergraduate classroom.

The good news is that there are many models out there for us to learn from, and for our students to consider and critique; some may be more genuinely open, or more successful, than others. In the environmental context, The Breakthrough Institute—“...a global research center that identifies and promotes technological solutions to environmental and human development challenges”—has long championed “achieving disagreement” as the goal of its annual dialog series, and even adopted this as the title of a 2018 conference.² In higher

² See thebreakthrough.org/events/ecomodernism-2018-achieving-disagreement.

education, Heterodox Academy, a “non-partisan collaborative” with several thousand participants, is dedicated to “... open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher learning,” and offers tips toward constructive disagreement in the classroom.³

There is suspicion, perhaps justified, around these initiatives.⁴ No matter what their limitations, the value of disagreement, in environmental and other contexts, is worth our serious consideration. Each essay in this Symposium offers guidance—starting with Emma Brush outlining one useful philosophical framework to reconsider disagreement, to the essay by Jennifer Bernstein cautioning us to be wary of simplistic measures of environmental agreement or disagreement, to my essay summarizing EcoTypes and its contribution toward discovering and engaging over difference, to that of Susan Caplow in applying EcoTypes to the undergraduate classroom to help students work with difference, and finally with Mark Neff and Zander Albertson developing an imperative for students to move toward discovering, and engaging over, disagreement in the higher education context.

We are each struggling in our own way to make sense of an increasingly polarized and fractious discourse in many realms, certainly environmental issues. It indeed feels impossible to find consensus, and though many of us continue to fight for what we believe to be true we grow weary of continued battle. Maybe there is a third way, one that takes difference and disagreement as a point of departure for the sort of open, honest, difficult conversation we value in a democracy, as not just an exchange of information but the weaving and reweaving of our social fabric. Let us see if we can build the skills among our students to initiate and lead these conversations across difference. Let us continue to explore difference in and outside of the classroom, and strive to embrace difference and disagreement as the resources these Symposium contributors believe they can be.

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³ See heterodoxacademy.org/ten-steps-open-inquiry-constructive-disagreement.

⁴ See e.g., Kallis and Bliss (2019); medium.com/@btawesome/contradictions-of-the-heterodox-academy-38d65db79a36.

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