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POL 300: Research Paper

11/30/15

Analyzing the Polarized Sociocultural Relationship among American Youth and the Natural Environment

In today’s society, the relationship between American youth and the natural world is diminishing. According to *The Nature Conservancy*, children’s interest and access to experiencing the outdoors is absent from society, but the fact is nearly 76% of today’s youth firmly believe pressing issues like climate change can be mitigated if efforts are taken now (The Nature Conservancy 2015). Children believe in protecting valuable environmental landscapes and waters, despite the contemporary dominance of the neoliberal economy (The Nature Conservancy 2015). A recent countrywide poll shows there is an intensifying discrepancy between the amount of time children spend outside appreciating nature and the time children spend inside fixated to technology. Most of today’s youth spend their days inside using a computer, watching TV, or playing video games; only 10% of kids say they are spending time outdoors (The Nature Conservancy 2015).

Children clearly care about the natural environment, however; their voices haven’t been heard considering the United States as a whole is failing to create an ecological contract among its citizens and the natural world to promote pro-environmental and sustainable economic, political, social and cultural behaviors. Our children are the key to a more sustainable future because they are the ones who will be leading actors within our communities and prospective politicians under our current democratic society. A lack of encouraging “biophilia” in children, understood as going outside and enjoying the natural environment, illuminates the disconnect between believing in protecting the environment and actually protecting it. Ultimately, I argue the relationship between the American youth and the great outdoors is dissolving due to the aesthetic hegemony of stimulating medias such as cellphones, TV, and videogames along with a lack of “free play” due to civic alienation from public parks and playgrounds, which in turn is polarizing and disrupting social and cultural sustainability efforts in light of creating an ecological contract to mitigate climate change.

Climate Change in the U.S.

The Environmental Protection Agency reports the imminent effects of climate change for the US include: warming temperatures, frequent heat waves that will threaten human health by increasing heat stress and air pollution, and intensified flooding accompanied by storm surge with sea level rise (EPA 2015). Additionally, the National Climate Assessment indicates that the U.S. average temperature has increased about 1.3°F-1.9°F since record keeping started in 1895, mainly happening since 1970 (U.S. Global Change Research Program 2014). Other effects caused by rising temperatures include: a shorter interval of ice on lakes and rivers, reduced glacial coverage, earlier melting of snow, decreased lake levels due to increased evaporation, changes in plant hardiness, increased humidity, rising ocean temperatures, and uncertainties with extreme weather (U.S. Global Change Research Program 2014). Recent evidence indicates that California is facing its worst drought in over a millennium due to global warming and climate change. A Stanford University study discloses that human induced climate change helps power the current drought in California, and the government’s response to climate change is also quite minimal or “solution deviating” as the state continues pumping in freshwater from out-of-state (Williams 2015). Essentially, America’s lack of sustainable action supports a clear-cut connection with the impacts of climate change and the need for an ecological contract, starting with our youth.

While children believe sustainable action on behalf of global climate change should be taken now, the U.S. has a history of discounting environmental policies. In 1995, the U.S. decided not to sign the Kyoto Protocol treaty for lowering carbon emissions because of the worry that China would pull ahead in the global marketplace (UNFCCC 2014). The Kyoto Protocol is known as one of the most noteworthy international treaties for addressing climate change and the U.S. response elucidates the parasitic relationship between market competition and natural resources that drive the global economy. Likewise, this damaging relationship is illuminated by the American thirst for petroleum oil, fueling both production and consumption in today’s capitalist society. Though oil resources are still rather abundant, the cost of salvaging oil is increasing and the cost will continue increasing until the supply of oil strikes zero (Braun and Glidden 2014, 44). Simply put, oil runs the world; we are merely consumers and materialists yearning for more petroleum-based goods such as plastics and gasoline that fuel our cars. Thus, to alleviate the gap between sustainable development and resource consequences of capitalism, something must be done to restore mankind’s relationship with nature. I believe attacking this issue starts with addressing the most hopeful and innocent element of human life: childhood.

Social and Cultural Sustainability Literature Review

Before I dive into youths’ relationship with nature and sociocultural sustainability, we first have to understand what “sustainability” is. Leslie Thiele in his book *Sustainability* develops a description that depicts sustainability as a dynamic “sculpture” intersected with science to negotiate an “ethical vision.” Achieving this “ethical vision” of sustainability entails meeting present-day needs exclusive of surrendering future generations’ affluence by preserving interests of ecological health, economic welfare, cultural creativity, and social empowerment (Thiele 2013, 4-5). For Thiele, culture or “cultural creativity” is the most significant factor because it relates to our daily routines, where children for example have the ability to catalyze a cultural shift with sustainability in American society since culture has the capacity to change over time.

Similar to Thiele, sustainability scholar Mark Davidson argues that cultural and societal empowerment is the gateway to sustainability’s fruition because being sustainable requires asking what society desires to sustain (Davidson 2009, 610). To express and strengthen communal values, a practice of conservation and greater social involvement must be implemented (615). Overall, a unified sustainable development plan by means of social and political action can create an ethical and sustainable urban future. Therefore, Americans have to engage in policy-making and not be distant from the political system (617). I argue this commitment to a unified sustainable development plan starts at a young age because this is when children learn to behave, develop routines and create memories of what it is like to be a human being in connection to nature.

 Davidson’s claims are notwithstanding from John Barry who suggests the concept of sustainability should be discursively created instead of handed down from the American polity (Barry 1996, 116). Barry reasons the premise of “sustainability” comes from using our public influence and voice to create an “ecological contract” between society and the government (117). It is important to establish an ecological contract because it safeguards and unifies a community’s ethical attitude toward humanness and environmental protection (119). In part, creating an ecological contract would also mend the gap amid relations of citizenship to sustainability in spite of barriers such as institutional capitalism and corporate-based governmental policies. Ultimately, the push for an ecological contract cannot be narrow; it must be comprised of broad transitions at the local level of society to meet the needs of all citizens (free-riders are not welcome). Thus, every single citizen must undertake a “sense of sustainability” in the best interests of “social goodness.” In making an ecological contract reality, each and every person must act, embrace, and agree on all grounds of the agreement, not corporate elites, non-governmental organizations or scientists (121). Only as one, as a global citizen of Planet Earth, will political and ethical interests of sustainability shift the social and cultural frame of thought today. For American citizens to accept the idea of being one with nature, one must identify oneself as Earth’s child at a young age and not later down the road when one’s mind is corrupted by neoliberalism, interface media technologies, and the consumer status quo for example.

International relations scholars Anne Runyan and V. Spike Peterson are also concerned with how social sustainability is conceptualized and addressed today. They note how every global climate change agreement on sustainable development mentions the importance of social impacts and social solutions, yet simply reducing emissions appears to be the main objective (Runyan and Peterson 2014, 224). Historically, the environment has been objectified as “Mother Earth,” which feminizes Earth’s resources on behalf of the masculine dominance of the neoliberal economy (221). Through a gender lens, masculine ideologies have perpetuated the idea that the environment is disposable and exploitable comparable to women. This leads to what Runyan and Peterson call “disaster capitalism”, since contemporary sustainability efforts are more focused on reconstructing rather than rebuilding natural disaster areas, for example the areas impacted after Hurricane Katrina (222). Statistically, women die 14 times more than men during natural disasters and this exposes not only the vulnerability of women and even children (losing their mothers), but the faultiness of sustainable development in the U.S.

Social and cultural sustainability have such a crucial impact on the others pillars of sustainability, it seems as if these pillars are crumbling. Besides, women and children have the smallest carbon footprint because of a lack of political voice with environmental decision-making and minimal land ownership, which temps resource exploitation (Runyan and Peterson 2014, 223). Essentially, the marketization of nature in a feminized sense can also be tied to governmentality (“art of politics”) and biopolitics (politics’ workings through the human body), two key ideas of postmodern theorist Michel Foucault. These ideas expose the power relations between the exploitation of nature on behalf of neoliberalism; and it is here one can see neoliberal governmentality and imperialist security governmentality clash with social and cultural sustainable development, since most if not all media technology derives from the neoliberal marketplace with the intention to keep consumers craving for more.

This brings me to mention what is called “Earth Democracy,” which is heavily opposed to the present-day top down neoliberal fueled U.S. government. Earth Democracy can be explained as trumping the synthetic inadequacy and manmade insecurities through seeing and experiencing “connections.” These so-called connections are rooted among corporations, economic and military wars, corporate profits and people’s destitution, and between globalization and religious fundamentalism (Runyan and Peterson 2014, 234). If American children (having open-mindedness) can start to dismiss these influences, we may begin to acknowledge our connection with one another and to Planet Earth. Still, without uncovering these links that are controlled and manufactured through power relations, we cannot transform our democracy into a society that lives alongside Earth. Ecological and social connectedness allows us to create living economies and living democracies through which all citizens have a certain connectedness with nature to form allegiance with ideological flows of power to overcome sociocultural differences (234).

Hegemony of Stimulating Medias

Throughout the last five years, children’s use of media has spiked considering on average young individuals spend over 7 and 1/2 hours a day using media technologies, compared to 6 and 1/2 hours five years ago (Rideout et al. 2010, 2). This statistic is particularly shocking because the amount of time children spent using media (usually more than one type at a time) is irrespective of the 10 hours and 45 minutes’ youth are daily exposed to media 7 days a week (2). More specifically, children ages 8 to 18 are using every type of media available to them more often except reading (2). Youth have expanded their media usage 24 minutes a day with videogames, 27 minutes for computers, 38 on TV, and 47 minutes listening to music (2). Most influential of all may be the development of mobile devices that allow and entice youth to absorb media through their cellphones. Today, nearly 66% of all 8 to 18 year olds own a cell phone and about 76% have a MP3 player or iPod (3).

 Over time, these numbers aren’t just numbers, they turn into a lifestyle driven by media consumption. Mobile media is now online media, making young people’s lives extremely convenient and almost thoughtless. Between high-speed internet access (Wi-Fi), TV shows broadcasted online, and the ongoing revolution of new “apps;” it is nearly impossible to escape the presence and hegemony, or power of media. Additionally, with more young Americans owning cellphones comes more Americans using media as a way to communicate with one another, effectively consuming more media than can be recorded (Rideout et al. 2010, 3). I argue this is alienating children from personal interactions with others, making it extremely difficult to function as makers of sustainable development because our youth are spending most of their time and brain capacity on absorbing stimulating media. Unfortunately, most medias have nothing to do with creating personal ties with others or establishing a connection to the natural environment, which is crucial to human development and overall happiness.

Yet, what fixates people to their screens? When Google was making headway as a private company in the late 1990s, Dr. Eric Schmidt was already convinced the 21st century would be identical to what he called an “attention economy.” Within this economy, he theorized the dominant global enterprises would be those that maximized the number of “eyeballs” or viewers they could constantly engage and regulate (Crary 2014, 75). Evidently, Dr. Schmidt’s belief is not far from the truth. Today, from the time we wake up until we fall asleep with our phones in our faces and the Google search engine in the background, media controls an individuals’ day by separating our humanness by means of marketization. Not only this, but our human identity is being succumbed to a digital identity as media websites like Facebook and Twitter are normalizing the idea and habit of a continuous interface between one’s digital identity and their personal identity (75). Corporate intrusion in the workings of media makes it omnipresent and hegemonic in the sense that our lives are now monitored, controlled, and even persuaded through our screens. It is what Jonathan Crary calls the “constant continuity of 24/7 capitalism” that causes us to be human subjects or even automatons (74). For Crary, the only thing that stands in way of totally relinquishing our humanness is the natural condition of sleep. But this too is being compromised by growing stimulating technologies, energy drinks, and nervous system enhancing pills to allow for more subjection to media and ultimately the cyber marketplace (74).

 On this notion, youth who spend more time on media actually have lower grades in school and lower levels of individual happiness (Rideout et al. 2010, 3). Empirically, those who consume more media are increasingly apt to admit they get into trouble more often, are unhappy, and get bored (3). Regarding social sustainability, how can our children and youth become makers of sustainable justice and create an ecological contract, if they are unhappy with their lives, end up getting in trouble with the law in the future, or have problems communicating with their peers? This is a serious social sustainable development issue as personal commitment to an Earth Democracy or ecological contract cannot be established if we do not have a personal commitment to sustain ourselves and our own prosperity.

However, in light of this media influenced social dilemma, parents that make an effort to limit their children’s media use by means of rules set at home, are more likely to spend less time on media outside the home compared to their peers. Specifically, in homes where parents don’t put a TV in a child’s bedroom, have the TV playing during dinner or in the background, or implement media restrictions, children spend less time with media outside the home (Rideout et al. 2010, 4). This method of restricting media is important because as young people hit ages 11-14, most youth experience a spike in total media use to about 8 hours a day (12 with media multitasking). The most substantial increases are in TV and videogame use by 5 hours a day (4). Ultimately, the relationship between youth and media amplifies during the transition from childhood into adolescence, whereas the child to adolescent transition should embody a greater commitment to social unity, not alienation from one another and more so the natural environment. If kids are stuck with their faces in their phones, TVs, and other forms of media technology, how can they possibly be outside enjoying nature?

A Lack of “Free Play”

As there tends to be a trend of children adopting media consumption habits into adolescence and most likely adulthood; it is important that children have the opportunity to play because for children, playing is learning and these learning habits impact a child’s future happiness and ability to succeed. Not only that, but play aids in developing cognitive thinking and reasoning abilities, which are well suited attributes for cultural creativity on behalf of sustainable development, as Thiele would argue. The Association for Childhood Education International says “play is a scaffold for development they will need later in life” (Sherer 2003, 23). Play is essential to how children will interact and communicate with others in the future, critical for social sustainability and the ability to discuss what must be sustained in a collective sense.

Yet, children are not playing as much anymore, especially outside. Alienation from the environment can be elucidated by the fact that in a survey, only half of today’s children say they go to a park twice a week or more (Loukaitou-Sideris and A. Sideris 2010, 94). Of these children (mostly boys), Hispanic and other minority children (60%) go to parks the most and stay their the longest (94). In the study, 20% of children said they never go to the park because their parents are too busy, while other reasons include safety precautions or distances from home (94). Furthermore, a poll was conducted asking 602 kids ages 13 to 18 what their attitude toward nature, outdoor activity and environmental issues was. Results show 80% of kids say it is uncomfortable to be outdoors because of bugs and heat, and 75% even say they have limited access to nature in their schools (The Nature Conservancy 2015).

Essentially, those who don’t use public parks more often have inactive lifestyles, hence these children don’t usually participate in outdoor activities in opposition to park users. Countless children say that parks “give you a chance to play with other people, they get you fit and healthy” (Loukaitou-Sideris and A. Sideris 2010, 95). Clearly, many children enjoy going to the park and interacting with their peers; but on the flipside, children who don’t go to the park often feel disconnected with other children and the natural world. A childhood comprised of unsupervised exploration and individual learning has been superseded by a childhood of restrictive parental supervision and strict scheduling (White 2004). This means the American childhood culture of playing outside has gone out the door to an inside focused learning environment. The key consequence of this cultural shift is the alienation of a child’s chance to have direct contact with nature during childhood; some go far as to say this immediate shift in the lives’ of children and their lack of free play outdoors is equal to a “childhood of imprisonment” (White 2004). This contemporary American childhood of imprisonment is correlated with a doubling rate of childhood obesity, diminishing creativity, and is deteriorating concentration and social skills (NWF 2015). To relinquish this imprisonment, the National Wildlife Federation suggests “it takes a playground, backyard and park to raise a child”, but today this is simply not reality (NWF 2015).

Americans have to understand that the health of the American community is at stake considering children are no longer able to explore the natural world, unlike children many generations ago who had greater autonomy outside the home. Sadly, this so-called “extinction of experience” is starting to create a lack of spirit and indifference towards environmental concerns (White 2004). Social Ecologist Stephen Kellert notes that today’s society is “so estranged from its natural origins, it has failed to recognize our species’ basic dependence on nature as a condition of growth and development” (White 2004). The amount of time children play outside has dramatically decreased. A new study surveying mothers discovered that 70% of them in the U.S. played outside every single day when they were a child. Today, merely 31% of these mothers’ children play outside (White 2004).

The absent linkage with children and nature is correlated to growing dominance and usage of media such as TV, cellphones, the Internet and videogames. Still, technology is playing such a heavy role in influencing media usage in relation to playing outdoors for children, that perhaps parents have an influence on this phenomenon. One survey reports that 54% of mothers say playing outside at a park or playground is an activity that makes their children the happiest, but today many children unfortunately lack the opportunity to go outside and play (Grey 2011, 445). There is much to be said about children spending time inside watching TV and playing videogames, but it can also be argued that children are simply not able to play outdoors, especially without parental supervision. When kids have the chance to go outdoors, they cannot find appealing places to play or groups of children to have fun with (445). While technology and media can be somewhat to blame for Nature Deficit Disorder, greater social unity and encouragement of outside play from parents and the “adult world” can be a more powerful stimulant than aesthetic images of media (Keffer 2015, 33).

Another survey by the IKEA Corporation found that 69% of technology privileged (heavily exposed to media) children in the U.S. say their favorite place to play is outside, which opposes the argument that kids who are heavily exposed to today’s media feel discomfort with nature (Grey 2011, 446). The real challenge for children here is raised by parents’ fears of letting their kids play outdoors because of media coverage regarding traumatic events like crimes, molestations, or murders (446). Largely, the hegemony of media appears to work “both ways” in terms of children’s time outside. Even though crime has statistically declined since the 1990s, within the IKEA survey, the main reason parents do not let their children play outside is because “they may be in danger of child predators,” while other factors include traffic and bullies (446).

Increased time and the growing importance given to education and other school related activities is also causing a decline in children’s play. Unlike anytime in history, children are not only expected to conform and act like adults at an extremely young age, but also perform as one. Today, kids spend more time in the classroom, making less time to have fun and play with other students. Furthermore, the number and length of days of the school year have increased, recess time has decreased, and in some school systems, recess is nonexistent (Grey 2011, 446). Regardless, teachers regularly note some of their most unruly students demonstrate an extraordinary gratefulness and emphasis on outdoor field trips. As Ken Keffer notes in his article “Kids and the Outdoors: It’s Natural,” teachers say students that cannot even sit down for a math test will sit still and count the legs of millipedes (Keffer 2015, 33). Needless to say, education and nature go hand in hand, almost as if we are meant to be one with nature and learn from the natural environment.

It just so happens that as the percentage of children playing outside is decreasing, childhood is the time they discover their “ecopsychological self,” or identity relative to Earth (White 2004). This particular stage of development is significant to sustainability because, as many argue; humans possess nature-based genetic coding and instincts at birth, which embody an innate relation to nature and a growth-related affinity regarding compassion and biophilia with our surrounding ecology (White 2004). We see this in children with their attraction to stuffed animals for instance, and furthermore; a child’s connectedness to nature is shown to correlate with environmental stewardship. It is also reasoned that positive encounters with nature and play can help develop an environmental ethic in later years (White 2004).

I can personally attest to this claim being an Eagle Scout and with my positive experiences with nature as a young scouter. At a young age, I was exposed to nature and expected to learn about what the great outdoors has to offer on my own. At times, I wasn’t allowed to go inside until sundown because my parents thought it was right in letting me have “free play.” It was quite a learning curve at first, but eventually this learning curve led me to camping, cooking my own meals and sleeping outside (being one with nature) as a young Boy Scout. What really sparked my stewardship, was my independence on a 186 mile canoeing excursion in Minnesota, where I was able to explore the beauties of nature on my own, without media, without the constant invasion of a “busy schedule” and structured life, or even parents looking over my shoulder telling me what to do or appreciate. For me, this was free play; this was my “great escape” so to speak that today leaves a branding mark on my life in terms of environmentalism and sustainability. Yet, all of this would not have been possible if I didn’t have the opportunity to play freely as a child and develop my relationship with nature. It is experiences like these at a young age through community involvement, playing at the playground, getting to know new kids, and so on, that enables you to further your passion for nature.

 Evidently, a child’s sense of environmentalism is a process of socialization. If a child lacks free play, he or she is going to feel somewhat disconnected from nature; thus nature is then seen as something to be tamed and controlled in place of being valued and cherished. When this happens, a child develops “biophobia,” or a fear of the environment. This can fashion agitation in natural settings because of ideological and socialized discrimination against nature and disgust for all that is not manmade, “structured,” or comfortable like an air-conditioned videogame room (White 2004). The overall health, well-being and social sustainability of American life can be maximized by giving children the opportunity to play informally outdoors. Playing outside may not be the solution to mitigating global climate change; but in a society where children can play, grow and develop into independent, curious, and bright individuals without as much media influence, may be a society where cultural creativity and greater civic engagement can lead to an ecological contract on behalf of sustainable development.

Conclusion

In essence, the relationship between American youth and the great outdoors is dissolving, but media technologies appear to have a more substantial influence on children’s connection to free play and nature than I thought. From my research, the linkage between a lack of free play and increasing media usage is causing childhood alienation or even imprisonment from the outside world. The power and attractiveness of media such as cellphones, websites like Facebook, and videogames are making it hard for both children and their parents to head outside and enjoy nature’s beauties, even if it means going to a park twice a week. Thus, there is strong evidence that the U.S. has and is currently undergoing a sociocultural shift in what it means to be one with nature. This shift can be attributed not only by the lack of free play and independence of our youth, but to the growing 24/7 attentiveness Americans have towards luring media interfaces. Unfortunately, this phenomenon causes children to feel isolated from the natural environment and distant from the intrinsic benefits of having ties to nature. It is during this childhood phase that Americans develop the skills necessary to be leaders of sustainability and have the capacity to reason what American society as a whole should sustain for present-day and future generations’ prosperity. Ultimately, due to the aesthetic hegemony of stimulating medias, American children are experiencing a lack of free play and self-learning, which in turn is polarizing and disrupting social and cultural sustainability efforts in light of creating an ecological contract or a stronger bond with nature in American democracy to mitigate climate change…But where do we go from here?

Sincerely, increasing outside free play and restricting exposure to media technologies for the American youth may be able to disrupt the downward trend of children living their lives in an inside, structured, and isolated manor to change the status quo of society. Playing outside is proven to spark creativity and that is what America needs. We need creativity in the midst of our busy lives to make us realize there is more to life than work and actively consuming from the free market economy. We also need to know that it is okay to play (even as adults). As to play means regaining our ties with Planet Earth, so that we, as Dr. Braun and Dr. Glidden note in their book *Understanding Energy and Energy Policy*, can challenge the uphill battle of normalcy, think outside the box, and dream another way of doing things in opposition to today’s practices and habits that protect the status quo (Braun and Glidden 2014, 162-163). To get off the beaten path of disregarding nature for our manmade technologies, this is what I believe must be done… and looking to Americas’ youth could be the answer.

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