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Social Justice and Water Sustainability and Management

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Abstract:

As the challenge of maintaining adequate water quantity and quality mounts worldwide, increasing attention is being paid to the role individual behavior plays in water resources management. Yet water resources management has attracted very little scholarly attention by psychologists. This chapter identifies how selected theories and methods from social scientific research on justice might inform water related decision making. This chapter illustrates how insights from psychological research on social justice can be employed to advance water resources management. Social justice, including issues of institutional regulation and behavior modification, is an essential consideration in the design and implementation of sustainable strategies for managing limited natural resources. Like other ecological threats, water scarcity is “caused or exacerbated by human activities, and [it] can ... be diminished or reversed by changes in human behavior, policies, or systems” (Oskamp & Schultz, 2006, pp. 82-83; see generally Bechtel & Churchman, 2002; Dean & Bush, 2007; McKenzie-Mohr & Oskamp, 1995). While psychologists have addressed environment-related concerns, such as resilience (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008), energy conservation and recycling (Oskamp & Schultz, 2006), and the psychosocial processes that underpin the work of environmental organizations (e.g., Dean & Bush, 2007), far less attention has been paid to water-relevant decision making. Still, there are several notable exceptions. For example, Bach (2004, cited in Oskamp & Schultz, 2006) demonstrated how principles of community-based social marketing (e.g., uncovering and targeting barriers to increased water-use efficiency) could be used to reduce Canadian citizens’ summer lawn watering. This study, and others like it (e.g., Corral-Verdugo & Pinheiro, 2006; Gregory & Di Leo, 2003; Pahl-Wostl, Craps, Dewulf, Mostert, Tabara, & Taillieu, 2007; Schultz, Folke, & Olsson, 2007), illustrate that psychology is well positioned to provide guidance on resolving water management issues, specifically, and environmental issues more generally. This is because:

- Individual behavior plays an essential role in environmental management.
- The concerted actions of group members, and of the groups themselves, play an essential role in environmental management (i.e., group dynamics come into play).
- Psychological considerations underpin all decision making, regardless of context,
- Psychological processes underlie individuals’ sense of what is fair in allocating scarce resources.