

Eco-habitus or Eco-powerlessness? Examining Environmental Concern across Social Class

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Abstract

Recent evidence of an association between status and eco-friendly practices invites examination of environmental concern across social class. Analyzing interview data from 64 socioeconomically diverse residents of Washington state, we observe variation in orientation to the environment across social class. High-status participants embody an eco-habitus—a sense that being “green” is good and also achievable. Lower-status participants express “eco-powerlessness”—fear and uncertainty in the face of environmental issues and a sense that one’s daily actions have little bearing on broader issues. We suggest that, among our participants, existing measures of environmental concern capture variation in their alignment with high-status preferences for environmental actions and in self-evaluations of their role in mitigating environmental problems. Our research contributes to a more culturally nuanced understanding of environmental concern by using qualitative data to explicate the association between social class and perceived self-efficacy to enact socioecological change in an era of consumer-based solutions to ecological crises.

Keywords

consumers and consumption, environment and technology, culture

Reconceptualizing Environmental Concern

Environmentalism is no longer a fringe practice associated with anticapitalist radicals and their academic sympathizers. Fossil fuel corporations buy high-rent advertising espousing their environmental commitments (Jones 2018), grocery store shelves are replete with eco-friendly products (Johnston 2008), and Hollywood actors produce documentaries about saving the environment. In contemporary North America, the preeminent approach to household-level environmental protection is green consumption, the purchase and use of eco-friendly alternatives to transportation, food, housing, and clothing (Anantharaman 2018; Johnston 2008; Lorenzen 2012). Although frugality and self-sufficiency constitute other important modes of protecting the environment, green consumption is the approach most strongly connected to social status (Carfagna et al. 2014; Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2018). If green consumption is both the dominant approach to

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environmental protection and a status symbol, what does that imply about the expression of environmental concern across class statuses?

In mainstream environmental sociology, we study environmental concern in large part because it is viewed as a construct that is antecedent to pro-environmental behaviors like buying organic foods and reducing energy use (e.g., Dietz, Stern, and Guagnano 1998; Dunlap and Jones 2002). Yet, this approach rests on an assumption that has been widely debunked outside environmental sociology: beliefs (like environmental concern) are not antecedent to action but are in a dialectic with action (Strand and Lizardo 2015). Put simply, people construct their beliefs based on a sense of what is possible and desirable to achieve in practice (Martin 2011). Recent scholarship focused on food consumption demonstrates that social class conditions consumption practices through access to resources, “not simply the resources of money and time to shop, prepare and eat in certain ways, but also the tastes or dispositions to do so in particular ways” (Maguire 2016:12). To understand variation in environmental concern, it is necessary to describe how actors perceive ideal and possible tastes in the context of personal responsibility to protect the environment.

Using analyses of semistructured interview data conducted with 64 socioeconomically and politically diverse residents of Washington state, we examine similarities and differences in how lower and higher status individuals in our sample make sense of environmental issues and their role in mitigating such issues. As Josée Johnston (2008) and others have noted, green consumption is a widely valued ideal for protecting the environment. In our sample, most participants evaluate their contributions to environmental protection against the ideal of green consumption. Our high-status participants perceive this engagement as achievable and often report strong feelings of concern for the environment. Lower status people in our sample also valued green consumption, but felt unable to achieve such ideal practices in their daily lives. Lower status participants in our sample report comparably lower levels of environmental concern. Our findings challenge approaches that argue low levels of environmental concern underlie low levels of engagement in pro-environmental behaviors (e.g., de Leeuw et al. 2015). In contrast, we suggest that because our participants perceive green consumption to be the ideal mode of engagement in environmental protection, actors who have a taste for engaging in green consumption, and the capacity to do so, express stronger environmental concerns because of a belief-action alignment (Strand and Lizardo 2015).

Environmental Concern and Social Class

Measuring concern for the environment is a cornerstone of environmental sociology (e.g., Dunlap 2015, 2016; Dunlap and Van Liere 1978; Stern and Dietz 1994). Riley E. Dunlap and Robert Emmet Jones (2002:485) define environmental concern as, “the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them and/or indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution.” This definition encompasses several themes: awareness (of problems), affinity (for solutions), and self-efficacy (to contribute). However, we suggest this definition lacks attention to how power and prestige shape each dimension of concern, most notably affinity and self-efficacy. For instance, which solutions are recognized as legitimate? And how does social status impact the extent to which one feels capable of contributing?

In contrast to the early years of environmental concern research more than 40 years ago, a focus on the urgency of environmental issues and understanding of natural resources as finite is much more common. For example, environmental education is introduced to students in the public education system, and postsecondary degrees in environmental studies have become more common (Romero and Silveri 2006). Environment and health are closely connected in the public discourse (Burningham and Thrush 2003; MacKendrick and Stevens 2016) and different eco-friendly, or “green,” lifestyles are increasingly common across class cohorts in the United States

(Lorenzen 2012; Schoolman 2017). Within civil society, there is now more widespread knowledge of the scope, severity, and complexity of environmental problems, including global climate change (Rockström et al. 2009).¹ And perhaps most important for our study, individuals are now more likely to imagine engaging in household-level, consumer-focused practices like recycling and buying eco-friendly products than in using traditional political means to exhort governments to use their regulatory clout to protect natural resources (Johnston 2008; Maniates 2001).

To keep pace with such changes, we argue that environmental sociologists should employ cultural perspectives to better understand the relationships between class and concern about environmental issues. Cultural sociologists reject the notion that human-environment relationships exist at the individual level, and draw from theories and evidence that our tastes and lifestyles are highly relational (Bourdieu 1984). These insights have recently been applied in the environmental domain (Carfagna et al. 2014; Laidley 2013a). In research on environmental justice, which is largely focused on the lived experiences of lower status groups, scholars have demonstrated that traditional definitions of environmental concern may not represent the full range of understandings, issues, or relationships to the nonhuman environment (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Bullard 2008; Burningham and Thrush 2003; Malin 2015; Taylor 2000). Yet, outside of environmental justice studies, research on environmental concern typically views concern as an individual-level construct and uses survey research to explore it. We interrogate how people perceive environmental concern by examining how a small sample of Washington state residents across the social class continuum experience their relationship to the environment and to environmental protection.

Environmental Concern as a Cultural Performance

Our study relies on research exploring relationships among social status, environmental concern, and pro-environmental behaviors. Within cultural sociology, scholars view environmental concerns and pro-environmental behaviors as part of an inadvertent performance of class. The performance of being green rests on an embodied orientation toward eco-friendly goods and activities driven by access to the economic and cultural resources required to incorporate such goods into a coherent lifestyle (Carfagna et al. 2014; Schor et al. 2016). Cultural sociological literature on environmental topics reveals that high-status consumption practices now seem to embody a new “ecological orientation, or . . . eco-habitus . . . [that] involves a reconfiguration of high-status tastes” (Carfagna et al. 2014:160). This reconfiguration, Lindsey B. Carfagna et al. (2014:160) argue, “is part of a re-articulation of the field of high-class consumption.”

The “eco-habitus” (Carfagna et al. 2014) builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) idea of a habitus, a system of embodied dispositions that organizes how people perceive and react to the world around them. The concept of an *eco-habitus* proposes that an orientation toward sustainably produced products can be found among high cultural capital (HCC) individuals (Carfagna et al. 2014; Kirby 2017; Schor et al. 2016). (The *eco-habitus* is associated more strongly with cultural capital than with economic capital.)² A recent test of this concept shows that in the domain of food consumption, the highest status consumers are oriented toward consumption that reflects aesthetic tastes and ethical commitments (Kennedy et al. 2018). The *eco-habitus* serves as a foundation for our argument that being ecologically concerned and committed to environmental protection is a class performance that awards distinction to those who can easily engage in green consumption. Although there is evidence of an *eco-habitus* among HCC consumers as this relates to preferences and behaviors, there is less focus on the beliefs and attitudes of high-status actors and even less examination of these themes among lower status actors (see Colocousis 2012; Perez and Egan 2016 for exceptions). Indeed, J. Smith Maguire (2016:11) calls for “more nuanced, dynamic accounts of the tastes and cultural competences of socially disadvantaged groups.”

Cultural approaches to understanding attitudes that appear “anti-environmental” refer to symbolic identity and social relations. For example, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016), in her analysis of political polarization in the United States, comes to see polarization as linked to multiple types of identity, including class, and she unexpectedly identifies environmental pollution as a key issue for libertarians in Louisiana. In her ethnographic research, Hochschild finds people who care deeply and are concerned about the environment, have been exposed to severe environmental degradation, and yet reject evidence of climate change and abhor environmental regulations (thus, appearing to outsiders as anti-environmental). The people she profiles experience frustration with environmental policies, even when these are intended to protect public health, and feel alienated from those who hold environmentalism as a core identity. Hochschild (2016) concludes that these experiences are intimately related to her participants’ individual and collective histories, particularly a feeling of marginalization and threat from both environmental issues and government efforts to resolve those issues.

The notion of class identity sensitizes us to consider how environmental concerns are relational: that is, formed in concert with others and reinforced by discourse in one’s social network. For example, Hochschild (2016) highlights how a desire for jobs as a means to regain prosperity, status, and honor for oneself and one’s family leads to a prominent belief among her libertarian interviewees that industrial pollution is an unavoidable side effect of economic prosperity (interestingly, this belief is reminiscent of Allan Schnaiberg’s [1975] account of a dominant societal-environmental dialectic). As one participant says, “Pollution is the sacrifice we make for capitalism” (Hochschild 2016:179). Yet, one does not come away from reading about Hochschild’s participants feeling that they are short on concern for the natural environment.

While readers may have expected Hochschild’s participants to be relatively unconcerned about the environment and uninterested in adopting pro-environmental actions, Kari Marie Norgaard’s (2011) study of relatively privileged residents in a small Norwegian town impacted by climate change showcases another dimension of environmental concern and action. Norgaard’s participants valued the environment deeply and expressed concern about both local and global environments. Yet, their actions did not reflect such concerns. Rather than rely on individual-level explanations for this “value-action gap” (e.g., Blake 1999; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002), Norgaard (2011) draws our attention to the cultural ways that apathy is produced and reproduced, a process she terms, “socially-organized denial.” These studies suggest that the relationship between environmental concern, culture, and class is far from monolithic. Even among quite privileged individuals, people may feel antipathy toward environmental protection policies because these policies seem at odds with their identities (Hochschild 2016) or may do little to act on environmental concerns in their daily lives, because doing so is painful and provokes a sense of uncertainty and is a challenge to their identity as a moral person (Norgaard 2011).

Cultural sociologists also highlight the importance of considering environmental beliefs in specific social contexts. Norgaard’s (2011) participants intuited conversational norms that middle-class society ought not raise troubling issues in social situations, and should reproduce narratives of Norwegians as people who are closely connected to the outdoors (Norgaard 2011). Thus, an implicit finding from Norgaard’s work is that in the Norwegian context, subtly expressing concern about the environment conveys a middle-class status; talking about environmental issues explicitly and visibly acting on one’s environmental concerns would threaten that status. In this paper, we draw on interviews from a politically and socioeconomically diverse (yet, geographically, racially, and ethnically homogeneous) sample to better understand how status and cultural capital shape the field of environmentalism in a context very different from Norgaard’s rich study. Specifically, we explore the question: *How do our participants, who come from a range of social classes, experience concern for the natural environment?*

Data and Methods

This paper is part of a larger qualitative study of political and class differences in Washington state residents' environmental concerns and actions conducted between June 2016 and July 2017. The dataset includes 64 interviews collected from a quota sample of residents of four communities, capturing both the more liberal western part of the state and the more conservative eastern part of the state, and including rural and urban areas, and urban clusters (towns). In each community, we sampled from high- and low-income neighborhoods (based on data from the 2010 American Community Survey and from Trulia, a database of home values). A team of four researchers, including the lead author of this paper, went door-to-door to invite participants until we attained roughly equal numbers of people from each type of neighborhood. Our results do not speak to environmental concern in a generalizable way. However, our findings matter because they shed light on how class position conditions environmental concerns, among a racially and geographically homogeneous sample. Understanding the relationship between class and concern in this context helps to advance the research on the relationship between class and concern in general.

The interviews covered several topics. The questions most relevant to this paper include asking people about the images that came to mind when they pictured "the environment" and the emotions they associated with those images. Also, we asked people to rate their concern for the environment on a scale from one to 10 and to explain their answer. A final question of importance asked participants to recount the last time they thought about their impact on the environment. Interviews were mostly conducted in participants' homes and lasted roughly one hour. Participants were offered a gift card from a local café or grocery store in recognition of the time spent on the interview.

At the end of each interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire asked about politics, gender, age, income, education, employment status and occupation, homeownership status, and other measures. Politically, roughly half ($n = 33$) of the sample is liberal, 24 participants are conservative, and 7 are moderate or would not answer the question about political orientation. We interviewed more women ($n = 35$) than men ($n = 29$), and the average age of our sample was 55, ranging from 21 to 90 years. The majority of our sample identified as white ($n = 60$). These and other sociodemographic characteristics are included in Table 1. To measure social status in our dataset, we adapted Thomas M. Laidley's (2013b) process for identifying high- and low-capital actors. We use Laidley's measure because this was the approach that Carfagna et al. (2014) followed, and our study most closely dialogues with their work articulating an eco-habitus. Like Laidley, we measure economic capital³ and cultural capital⁴ for each of our participants. More details on these measures are provided in Table 2.

We analyzed our data using analytical coding, applying identified patterns to relevant segments of the interview transcripts, in a qualitative data management program (NVivo 10 for Mac). Our approach involved "decontextualizing" themes in the data by bringing together excerpts of text from across interviews into a common theme. We then "recontextualized" our data following Amanda Jane Coffey and Paul Anthony Atkinson's (1996) method by analyzing patterns within each theme, noting the economic and cultural capital of the speaker (using the matrix query technique). A matrix query is a proxy of a cross-tabulation, wherein we can see how frequent mentions of a particular theme were across social class. In this way, we were able to note that appreciation for the environment is evenly distributed across class though scores for concern for the environment are higher among those with more cultural capital. Unpacking those scores with qualitative data allowed us to note patterns across social class in the extent to which participants evoked an eco-habitus or eco-powerlessness.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Site	Gender	Age	Race	Children in home	Political orientation	Employment status	Income midpoint (\$)	Homeownership	Occupation (current or previous)	Education
Addy	Rural, Western	F	40	White	Y, 2	Liberal	Part time	50,000	Own, mortgage	Bookkeeper	Bachelor's
Amber	Town, Eastern	F	32	White	Y, 3	Conservative	Full time	65,000	Own, mortgage	Investigator	Bachelor's
Angela	Town, Eastern	F	39	White	Y, 3	Liberal	Parenting	120,000+	Own, mortgage	Reporting analyst	Bachelor's
Annie	Urban, Western	F	59	White	N	Liberal	Full time	75,000	Own, mortgage	Realtor	Master's
Avery	Town, Eastern	F	45	White	Y, 2	Liberal	Full time	120,000+	Own, mortgage	Librarian	Master's
Ben	Rural, Western	M	77	White	N	Liberal	Retired	75,000	Own	Investment advisor	Bachelor's
Betty	Town, Eastern	F	85	White	N	No response	Retired	No response	Own	Realtor	PhD
Bill	Town, Eastern	M	34	White	Y, 3	Conservative	Parenting	50,000	Rent	Realtor	Bachelor's
Brian	Town, Eastern	M	48	White	Y, 3	Liberal	Full time	75,000	Own	Professor	PhD
Burt	Rural, Eastern	M	55	White	No	Conservative	Retired	12,000	Rent	Farm laborer	High school
Caitlyn	Rural, Western	F	38	White	N	Liberal	Full time	35,000	Own, mortgage	Bartender	High school
Carissa	Urban, Western	F	37	White	Y, 1	Liberal	Unemployed	35,000	Rent	Health technician	PhD
Charles	Rural, Western	M	66	White	N	Liberal	Part time	8,000	Rent	Cleaner	Some high school
Cheryl	Urban, Western	F	61	White	N	Liberal	Retired	50,000	Own, mortgage	Social work assistant	Bachelor's
Christine	Rural, Eastern	F	28	White	Y, 2	Conservative	Parenting	12,000	Occupied without rent	Homecare aid	High school
Darren	Rural, Eastern	M	67	White	N	Conservative	Retired	12,000	Rent	Carpenter	High school
Dave	Rural, Western	M	32	White	N	Liberal	Full time	35,000	Rent	Computer technician	Some college
Denny	Urban, Western	M	44	Native American	N	No response	Full time	No response	Rent	Fireman	Bachelor's
Don	Rural, Western	M	66	White	N	Liberal	Full time	25,000	Rent	Taxi driver	High school
Ed	Urban, Western	M	82	White	N	Conservative	Retired	75,000	Own	Consultant	Master's
Eileen	Town, Eastern	F	59	White	N	Liberal	Part time	30,000	Own	Substitute teacher	Master's
Elena	Town, Eastern	F	82	White	N	Liberal	Retired	35,000	Own	Social worker	PhD
Ellen	Rural, Eastern	F	33	Asian	N	No response	Full time	8,000	Rent	Author	Bachelor's
Eloise	Urban, Western	F	47	White	Y, 1	Liberal	Full time	75,000	Own	Judge	PhD
Greg	Urban, Western	M	66	White	N	Conservative	Retired	50,000	Own, mortgage	Sales rep	High school
Hank	Town, Eastern	M	90	White	N	Liberal	Retired	75,000	Own	Professor	PhD
Hannah	Rural, Eastern	F	40	White	Y, 5	Conservative	Full time	75,000	Own	Store manager	Bachelor's
Harriet	Rural, Western	F	72	White	N	Conservative	Retired	120,000+	Own	Teacher	Master's
Ina	Town, Eastern	F	64	Asian	N	No response	Part time	No response	Own	Teacher	Bachelor's
Ivan	Urban, Western	M	66	White	N	Liberal	Retired	120,000+	Own	IT manager	Master's
Jake	Town, Eastern	M	71	White	N	Liberal	Retired	30,000	Own	Writer, videographer	Master's
James	Rural, Eastern	M	33	White	Y, 2	Conservative	Full time	35,000	Own	Maintenance	High school
Janet	Urban, Western	F	55	White	N	Liberal	Part time	No response	Own, mortgage	Volunteer coordinator	Master's

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Name (pseudonym)	Site	Gender	Age	Race	Children in home	Political orientation	Employment status	Income midpoint (\$)	Homeownership	Occupation (current or previous)	Education
Jeff	Town, Eastern	M	45	White	Y, 2	Conservative	Full time	75,000	Own, mortgage	Technician	Trade school
Jenny	Rural, Eastern	F	44	White	Y, 2	Conservative	Full time	100,000	Own	City administrator	Bachelor's
Jerry	Town, Eastern	M	63	White	N	No response	Retired	75,000	Own	Utility designer	High school
Jim	Town, Eastern	M	29	White	N	Liberal	Full time	20,000	Rent	Chef	High school
Joanne	Town, Eastern	F	42	White	N	Conservative	Full time	35,000	Own, mortgage	Store manager	High school
John	Rural, Western	M	71	White	N	Liberal	Retired	No response	Own, mortgage	Mail carrier	Bachelor's
Josh	Town, Eastern	M	59	White	N	Liberal	Part time	No response	Own, mortgage	Videographer	Bachelor's
Judy	Urban, Western	F	52	White	N	Liberal	Full time	75,000	Own, mortgage	School counselor	PhD
Karen	Rural, Eastern	F	56	White	N	Conservative	Full time	30,000	Own	Daycare worker	Some high school
Kim	Town, Eastern	F	38	White	Y, 2	Liberal	Full time	40,000	Rent	Marketing	Master's
Kyle	Town, Eastern	M	45	White	Y, 1	Conservative	Full time	120,000+	Own, mortgage	Military	Master's
Laurel	Urban, Western	F	67	White	N	Liberal	Full time	120,000+	Own	Lawyer	PhD
Lexi	Town, Eastern	F	21	White	N	Liberal	Part time	12,000	Rent	Nanny, barista	Some college
Linda	Rural, Western	F	68	White	N	Liberal	Retired	No response	Rent	Teacher	Bachelor's
Lindsay	Town, Eastern	F	28	White	N	Liberal	Full time	15,000	Rent	Clinical psychologist	PhD
Louise	Rural, Eastern	F	57	White	N	Conservative	Full time	50,000	Own	Caregiver, bartender	High school
Myra	Town, Eastern	F	45	White	Y, 4	Liberal	Parenting	45,000	Own, mortgage	Bank teller	Bachelor's
Nadine	Urban, Western	F	47	White	N	Liberal	Part time	60,000	Rent	Counselor	PhD
Rachel	Rural, Western	F	41	White	N	Liberal	Full time	100,000	Occupied without rent	Painter, industrial	Less than elementary
Ronald	Rural, Eastern	M	60	White	N	Conservative	Retired	35,000	Own	Farmer	High school
Sarah	Rural, Western	F	57	White	N	Conservative	Retired	75,000	Own	Teacher	Master's
Scott	Urban, Eastern	M	60	White	N	Conservative	Full time	75,000	Own	IT manager	Master's
Sharon	Rural, Western	F	63	White	N	Conservative	Full time	75,000	Own, mortgage	Business owner	Some college
Shauna	Town, Eastern	F	32	White	N	Conservative	Full time	120,000+	Rent	Project manager	Master's
Shelby	Town, Eastern	F	40	White	Y, 2	Liberal	Full time	50,000	Rent	Educational advisor	Master's
Sherry	Rural, Eastern	F	47	White	Y, 2	Conservative	Part time	50,000	Own	Preschool teacher	High school
Ted	Rural, Eastern	M	42	White	N	Conservative	Full time	50,000	Rent	Truck driver	High school
Tina	Rural, Eastern	F	40	White	Y, 2	Conservative	Full time	50,000	Own, mortgage	Farmer, nurse	Bachelor's
Tom	Urban, Western	M	29	White	N	Liberal	Part time	20,000	Rent	Bike technician	Bachelor's
Travis	Urban, Western	M	38	White	Y, 1	Liberal	Parenting	75,000	Own, mortgage	Construction worker	Some college
William	Rural, Western	M	65	White	N	No response	Retired	50,000	Own, inherited	Carpenter	High school

Note. IT = information technology.

Table 2. Measuring Social Class.

Name (pseudonym)	Subjective status assessment	Economic capital (2–42)			Cultural capital (0–30)		
	(1 = lowest; 10 = highest)	Total	Income per person (2 = lowest; 30 = highest)	Homeownership (rent = 0; mortgage = 6; own = 12)	Total	Occupation (current or previous) (0 = lowest; 15 = highest)	Education (0 = lowest; 15 = highest)
Addy	5	12	6	6	15	9	6
Amber	5	9	9	0	9	3	6
Angela	7	27	15	12	15	9	6
Annie	6	21	15	6	21	9	12
Avery	6	21	15	6	24	15	9
Ben	7	27	15	12	15	9	6
Betty	7	—	NR ^a	12	24	9	15
Bill	5	4	4	0	15	9	6
Brian	7	12	6	6	27	12	15
Burt	2	8	2	6	0	0	0
Caitlyn	5	15	9	6	3	0	3
Carissa	7	9	9	0	24	9	15
Charles	2	2	2	0	0	0	0
Cheryl	5	10	4	6	15	9	6
Christine	2	2	2	0	6	3	3
Darren	5	2	2	0	9	6	3
Dave	4	12	6	6	15	9	6
Denny	1	6	6	0	9	3	6
Don	4	4	4	0	6	3	3
Ed	9	27	15	12	18	9	9
Eileen	7	16	4	12	21	12	9
Elena	8	18	6	12	27	12	15
Ellen	2	2	2	0	18	12	6
Eloise	9	27	15	12	30	15	15
Greg	6	24	12	12	12	9	3
Hank	6	21	9	12	30	15	15
Hannah	5	21	9	12	15	9	6
Harriet	8	42	30	12	21	12	9
Ina	6	—	NR ^a	12	18	12	6
Ivan	7	42	30	12	21	12	9
Jake	2	16	4	12	27	12	15
James	4	10	4	6	3	0	3
Janet	5	—	NR ^a	6	15	6	9
Jeff	6	12	6	6	12	6	6
Jenny	6	24	12	12	15	9	6
Jerry	7	27	15	12	15	12	3
Jim	3	4	4	0	9	6	3
Joanne	5	12	6	6	9	6	3
John	6	—	NR ^a	6	9	3	6
Josh	7	—	NR ^a	6	9	3	6
Judy	6	15	9	6	28	12	16

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Name (pseudonym)	Subjective status assessment	Economic capital (2–42)			Cultural capital (0–30)		
	(1 = lowest; 10 = highest)	Total	Income per person (2 = lowest; 30 = highest)	Homeownership (rent = 0; mortgage = 6; own = 12)	Total	Occupation (current or previous) (0 = lowest; 15 = highest)	Education (0 = lowest; 15 = highest)
Karen	2	18	6	12	6	6	0
Kim	4	6	6	0	18	9	9
Kyle	5	36	30	6	12	3	9
Laurel	7	27	15	12	27	12	15
Lexi	6	2	2	0	6	0	6
Linda	5	—	NR ^a	0	18	12	6
Lindsay	7	2	2	0	27	12	15
Louise	7	18	6	12	3	0	3
Myra	6	10	4	6	12	6	6
Nadine	6	12	12	0	27	12	15
Rachel	6	9	9	0	3	3	0
Ronald	5	18	6	12	6	3	3
Sarah	8	27	15	12	24	12	12
Scott	8	27	15	12	18	9	9
Sharon	7	12	6	6	15	9	6
Shauna	4	30	30	0	18	9	9
Shelby	1	4	4	0	21	9	12
Sherry	4	12	6	6	12	6	6
Ted	1	12	12	0	6	3	3
Tina	5	10	4	6	15	9	6
Tom	5	4	4	0	9	3	6
Travis	6	12	6	6	9	3	6
William	6	14	2	12	6	3	3

^aNo response.

From Powerlessness to Eco-habitus: Reconsidering Environmental Concern as Class and Identity Performance

As noted above, contemporary environmental concern in the United States is situated in the context of broader cultural trends: increased awareness of environmental problems (Dunlap and Jones 2002) and knowledge of their complexity (Rockström et al. 2009), and a social value for personal, consumer-focused action to protect the environment (Maniates 2001; Szasz 2007). Evidence suggests engaging in green consumption is the preeminent ideal for household engagement in environmental protection (Anantharaman 2017, 2018) and most commonly practiced by high-status actors in society (Carfagna et al. 2014; Kennedy et al. 2018).

Below, we demonstrate that lower status participants in our study described a deep sense of powerlessness to adopt personal actions to protect the environment, while higher status participants felt a strong sense of self-efficacy. Also, participants with high volumes of capital and relatively more cultural than economic capital most clearly articulated an eco-habitus and a taste for

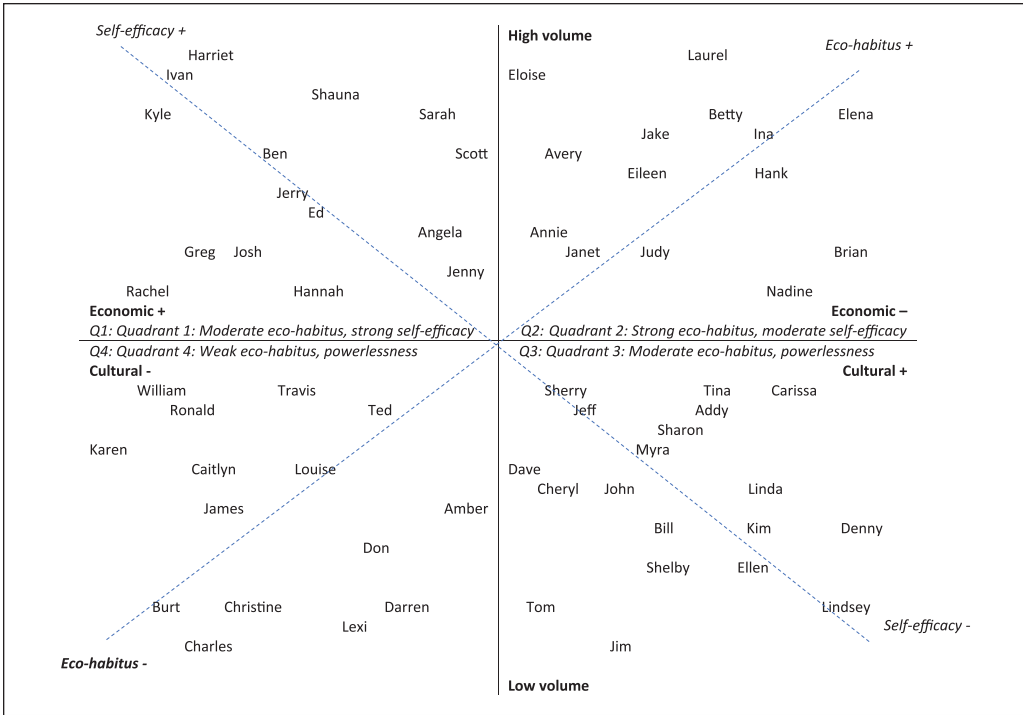


Figure 1. Approximate location of sample participants in social space; general association between social class, eco-habitus, and self-efficacy.

ethical consumption. Those with low volumes of capital did not express this eco-habitus. These patterns are reflected in Figure 1, which includes dashed lines indicating eco-habitus and self-efficacy, where “+” denotes alignment with either eco-habitus or self-sufficiency and “-” denotes a negative relationship to these themes. Those who are closer to the positive end of eco-habitus feel this orientation deeply and “naturally,” while those on the negative end do not feel it at all. Likewise, the positive end of self-efficacy is felt as deeply agentic and having self-determination, and the negative end is a sense of powerlessness and lack of control. Note that Figure 1 also estimates the relative distribution of our participants in the social space created by the volume and relative proportions of their economic and cultural capital in the field of environmentalism. Finally, we number each quadrant in this diagram, from 1 through 4. We describe each of these quadrants below.

The Eco-habitus

Quadrant 1: Moderate eco-habitus, strong self-efficacy. The participants in Quadrant 1 generally have high stores of capital but have relatively more economic than cultural capital. Participants in this quadrant felt little unease about their relationship to the natural environment and enjoyed participating in responsible consumption activities, rarely doubting the efficacy of these actions. For example, Harriet is a 72-year-old conservative woman who lives in an amenity-rich rural area. Her family is extremely wealthy, owning and farming vast landholdings in California. Typical of people in Quadrant 1, Harriet expresses little guilt or unease about her impact on the environment. She conveys a sense of pride related to her altruistic actions and feels confident that the natural environment will continue to benefit her and her family for years to come. When we ask

Harriet what she pictures when we say “environment,” she pictures the outdoors and says, “Everything should be like my little garden, pristine.” Elaborating on this, she says,

I like the environment here. My environment is not like a Third World country. That’s not how I like to see the earth. I know there are places like that, I’ve been to an awful lot of them but this is how I like to think of the environment, with rose-colored glasses. And I donate to environmental concerns, so, you know, as one person I’m trying not to leave a very big footprint.

Harriet feels she has the power to create a pristine environment around her and feels unproblematically confident about her mark on the world.

Participants in Quadrant 1 did not convey strong emotions about the environment, felt confident about their impact on the world, and confident they could address environmental challenges. When we asked Kyle, a 44-year-old conservative man who earns a large salary as a campus military recruiter, to tell us about what he does in his daily life to act on his value for the environment, he replies,

Yay! I’m so glad you asked me that question. I like to think we have done some things to improve the environment. We’ve done some walks and awareness things. We went to a “wild walk” parade last weekend. It was a parade to help bring awareness about the environment and loss of species and things like that. I try to do a little bit of conservation on a very rudimentary small scale. Grow trees and try to plant them. We recycle religiously.

Although the actions Kyle describes are not overwhelmingly involved (compared with participants in Quadrant 2), he is very proud of these actions and conveys no doubt about their efficacy. Jerry is a 63-year-old retired utility designer who earned a great deal of income despite having only a high school diploma, and now divides his time between a town in eastern Washington and his cabin in rural Idaho. Jerry describes getting publicly involved in efforts to protect the local environment. In response to his concerns about the impact of the forest industry on fish habitat in a local river, he says, “A friend of mine and I started a grassroots organization to protect the river so we can show up at meetings and talk to the forest service.” As a result of these efforts, he feels very satisfied with environmental protection in his community.

The 15 participants in Quadrant 1 scored their level of environmental concern around 7.5 out of 10, on average. Making sense of this value, we argue that these actors feel confident they will always have a pristine environment around them, feel they would be able to respond effectively if threats to their environment arose, and feel positively about their impact on the natural world.

Quadrant 2: Strong eco-habitus, moderate self-efficacy. Participants in Quadrant 2 represent what we suggest are the people typically labeled as environmentally concerned actors in most survey research. These participants have high stores of cultural and economic capital but relatively more cultural than economic capital. They feel passionately about the environment and experience the compulsion to consume in an eco-friendly way as perfectly natural. While they express strong emotions around their doubts about how the environment will fare if humanity continues consuming at current rates, they do not doubt their own commitment to being part of positive social change.

Nadine comes from a well-educated family. Until recently, a high income and residence on a small farm enabled her to practice what she views as the ideal lifestyle, involving producing food for her own consumption, using solar power for electricity, and having a well for her water supply. Now that she has returned to graduate school to earn a PhD, she is renting a room in a home on a small lot and has a much lower income. Yet, even with a reduced income, and despite feeling dissatisfied with her current lifestyle, Nadine grocery shops exclusively at the local food co-op

where she purchases organic foods and products. She mentions the term “sustainable consumption,” and we ask her to explain what she means:

Sustainable consumption? That’s what I do . . . well, that’s what I’ve been able to do, and I continue to do it, interestingly enough, in absence of money. It’s weird. That just feels congruent, it just makes sense to me.

It is natural and effortless for Nadine to practice green consumption.

A clear example of the emotional intensity of environmental concerns among Quadrant 2 participants comes from Annie, a realtor with a master’s degree who lives in an urban community. Annie is from a highly educated family in California; as a child, she spent time in remote areas in several U.S. states as her father worked as a cartographer for the U.S. government. Annie explains her 10-out-of-10 concern for the environment in this way:

I feel myself so much a part of the environment. It’s kind of like me relating to the whole. That I’m not just me, singular, alone and separate, that in a very large sense there is no separation. There is, for me, a constant sense of draw and of wanting to relate back to the environment of which I’m a part.

Similarly, Judy, a PhD-educated high school counselor who resides in the same community as Annie, says,

I’ve always felt really connected to the earth and I always had a very strong sense of caring and concern for the environment. I was raised in a way that it was really important for us to respect the earth because the earth is what’s taking care of us and we depend on it 100% . . . I’m starting to feel that maybe we’re not going to be able to stop what’s going on right now. So, I’m scared and I feel sad because I feel like the earth is hurting.

Quadrant 2 participants feel their connection to the earth extremely deeply, and this relationship to the environment was often cultivated by their parents. Although many comments from people in our sample who we situate in Quadrant 2 convey a degree of powerlessness in the sense of worrying about complex, global environmental issues, they do not doubt their own moral commitment and responsibility to protect the environment.

Participants in Quadrant 2 are much more involved in pro-environmental activities than others in our sample, and tend to judge those around them on the basis of their commitment to the environment. For instance, Jake, who is a retired doctor who lives in a rural area, discusses his personal commitment to avoid meat because of his environmental concerns, and his disgust with people who are less committed:

The biggest thing I do is that I’m vegan . . . Somebody showed me this video called “The Strip Mining of The Seas.” All these massive nets and all these fishermen. At the end of it I gave up eating fish and got more involved in climate change. I realized, I have done a really good thing, this is great. Because the single biggest thing that any individual . . . also any family can do on the environment is be aware of what we consume. It’s really quite horrifying how many people haven’t got the message.

Elena is a potter in her 80s. She and her husband, a retired professor, live in the urban cluster site and live off of a moderate income. Elena explains how important environmental concern is to shaping her social circle: “You tend to hang together people of your own feather . . . So most of the people that we hang around with definitely are just as concerned about the environment as we are.” Eileen, who earns a small income working as a climate change educator and holds a master’s degree, tells us she cannot associate with people who do not care about the environment, and that as a result, she has felt quite lonely: “Most of our friends are people who think and feel the

way we do. Because we live in a small community, it gets kind of lonely. We don't get invited to very many dinner parties." Brian, a PhD educator-instructor at a large university, with a moderate income, notes that his birth family is not as concerned as he is about the environment and that as a result, he spends less and less time with them.

For the 14 people in Quadrant 2, the motivation to consume sustainably is strong and is reflected in their social networks and rooted in their deep, and emotional fears about the environment. These are the sensibilities and impulses of the eco-habitus. The average score that people coded under the theme of "eco-habitus" gave for their level of environmental concern is 9.5 out of 10.

The Eco-powerless

Quadrant 3: Moderate eco-habitus, powerlessness. Perhaps the most frustrating place to be in the field of environmentalism is in Quadrant 3. The 19 people in this quadrant, like Quadrant 2, have more cultural capital than economic capital, but their overall volume of capital is low. Here, actors feel that they should be engaging in green consumption on a daily basis and are frustrated at their inability to do so. They experience this feeling as a personal failure rather than noting structural issues like access to green consumer goods, corporate control over the supply chain, and the government's general failure to regulate the environment. This is most poignantly captured in a quotation from an interview with Cheryl, a retired social worker who lives in the urban site. Cheryl, who has a bachelor's degree and earns a moderate income, says that she feels she does not consume sustainably enough, as she has a gas-powered car (she cannot afford the electric vehicle she wants), and she often does not know how to estimate the environmental impact of goods in the marketplace. We ask her how that feels, and she tells us,

There's so many ways that I feel like this is just another way that I'm not measuring up. My reach is exceeding my grasp. Aims and goals and things that might be in the process of being met but aren't met yet. So, it's a feeling of, oh, yeah, that again. It's pretty familiar. The theme of this lifetime.

Cheryl thinks about her impact on the environment almost every day, but says that she rarely acts on those thoughts. She is aware of a standard related to ecological citizenship that she does not meet yet aspires to.

Many people in Quadrant 3 saw green consumption as an ideal that they were unable to meet because they lacked the money to do so. The next quote is from Jim, a man in his early 30s who spent two years at university and now works as a prep cook in eastern Washington. Jim's comments convey a common tension between two ideals: green consumption and savvy consumption. While the green consumer ideal-type would happily and effortlessly pay a cost premium for eco-friendly goods, the savvy consumer ideal-type researches green products to make sure they are spending money wisely and getting the most value for their dollar. Jim tells a story of his recent purchase of organic coffee:

There's this organic coffee, "Harvest something." It's just down at [the local store]. I was like "Oh yeah, it's organic coffee, that'll help the environment." But after I bought it, I thought, I did get it from the grocery store, maybe it's just rebranded. Maybe I should do a little more research into these organics before I pay an extra \$2. I did buy it, I tried it. But I couldn't really tell the difference so I went back to the cheap-o stuff.

I: How does it feel to go back to the cheap stuff?

R: Like I have 2 more dollars! But umm . . . it feels like, uh, like a compromise. Like I'm settling for the cheaper product. Like it would be nice to know where the product came from. To know it's sustainable and organic and all that.

For Jim, engaging in this act of green consumption was driven in part by a concern for the environment and also a sense that this is valued practice that he should adopt. John, a retired mail carrier who has a bachelor's degree and lives in an amenity-rich, rural community, expressed similar sentiments as Jim, and at great length, describing moments where he has been duped by green branding on pickles, frozen vegetables, and cantaloupe. For example, John recounts a story about buying pickles:

Now here's an interesting story—kind of depressing—did you know most pickles are now made in, or, they come from India? Yeah, the reason I got started buying Farman's dill pickles is the label said, "Great Northwest taste since 1948 blah blah blah." But I read the back of the label one day at home, and it says on the product, says, "Made in India." I mean, who knew that? You can check it out when you get back. Who knew? I mean, really?

Both Jim and John want to be green consumers, but this compulsion does not feel embodied, or "natural," as it did for those with an eco-habitus and is often at odds with their efforts at being savvy consumers.

Quadrant 3 captures people in our sample who expressed a perceived inability to effect positive environmental change. The eco-powerless in our sample often described having to force themselves not to think about environmental issues, as these were upsetting topics. These themes are similar to what Norgaard's (2011) middle-class Norwegian sample described. For example, Myra, who stays at home with four children and whose husband works as a pastor, mentioned nonchalantly that several of her close family members died from cancer that she believes was linked to the intense pesticide use in the farming community where she was raised. When asked if this knowledge impacts her consumption choices, she says,

I just choose not to think about it that much. I mean I'm sure it'd be better if we ate organic stuff. Especially with my mom and her siblings getting cancer from pesticides but I think I choose not to worry about it. I mean, I can't really control it and we can't afford to buy organic food, so I just don't worry about it.

Quadrant 3 participants feel powerless both in terms of aligning their actions and their ideals, and also because of the complexity of environmental issues and the uncertainty that their efforts would bring about any significant change. Tom, who works as a bicycle repair person in the urban site, describes how upset he feels about the amount of traffic congestion, globally, because of the impact of vehicle emissions on the environment:

It makes me feel sad. Makes me feel a little helpless. There's a lot of moving parts, a lot of people on the planet and they're all doing something. It's a little helpless feeling, like what can you possibly do as one person? Like even changing your habits, it's a hard thing to change.

In other words, people's environmental concerns here seem to be partly driven by their (limited) ability to engage in green practices and also stymied by the daunting nature of the problem.

Responses in Quadrant 3 relate to a sense that they are not measuring up to a class of environmentalism that they value but that feels out-of-reach. Rather than critique the benefits of green consumption (and recognize their own very small carbon footprints) or question corporate and state responsibility to protect the environment, people in Quadrant 3 express a sense of anomie in response to their relationship with the environment; a feeling of isolation and deep powerlessness. On average, people here rated their level of concern as 7 out of 10.

Quadrant 4: Weak eco-habitus, powerlessness. Without exception, the 15 participants in Quadrant 4 reported trying not to think about their environmental concerns because they felt unable to do

anything about them. Charles did not complete high school, has spent time homeless, and now works as a janitor and rents a room in a small house. But he lives in an amenity-rich rural community that he moved to because he was so struck by the natural beauty of the place. When Charles talked about the environment, he says, “Well, for me, it’s everything. Environment is where we are, because we are in relationship with everything around us.” Yet, he explains that he does not prioritize environmental protection in his own life:

Because it’s not like there are options. The situation exists. It’s not going to change. We have to change individually, one at a time . . . I don’t see that happening in my day and age. I accept it. This is the nature of our existence. I’m not going to fight it. What would be the point? You can spend your life fighting city hall, if that is what you want to spend your life doing. I don’t.

In Quadrant 4, people suggested that feeling concerned about the environment felt like a type of power and agency that they lacked. For instance, Amber, a 33-year-old single mother of three children under nine, who works as an investigator for a community college in eastern Washington, says,

Should I worry about the environment, should I do something to help? Yes, but I don’t feel at this time in my life I’m able to really do that. Whether that is donating money to different causes or doing it myself. I just don’t have the time or the money.

Although Amber is not engaged in green consumption, she later says, “In an ideal world, I would ride a bike to work and just use the car when it’s absolutely necessary. Have a garden and grow our own food. Buy less of the convenience type things.” Amber’s comments suggest that green consumption is perceived as an ideal, but one that is out of reach for many people we interviewed. Karen, who works as an aide in a daycare, did not complete high school, and lives in rural, eastern Washington, is similarly interested in buying local and organic foods and gardening, because she feels these are better for her health and the environment, but she feels overwhelmed by how much she would have to learn to navigate those new consumer practices.

In contrast to those in Quadrant 3, who felt that environmental protection was their responsibility but that they were somehow failing to uphold that duty, people in Quadrant 4 were most likely to point the finger at larger systems and powerful actors. Darren, a 67-year-old retired carpenter and Vietnam War veteran, said that he feels there is nothing he can do to help the environment he cares so much about. In his words,

The real problem I see is the big corporations that can’t take care of their waste any other way than dumping it the way they’re dumping it without spending millions of dollars or changing the way they’re doing things. What can I do about that?

And Ted, a resident of rural eastern Washington who works as a truck driver and holds a high school diploma, explains that he does not think environmental protection is largely an individual’s responsibility. In regard to waste, for instance, he says, “Can’t we package it differently? I’d like to see more biodegradable packaging instead of plastic packaging. That would make a lot more sense.” And, in general, he thinks corporations have more responsibility than individuals:

Because we’re gonna buy what they give us. I think it’s their responsibility to start promoting more eco-friendly packaging and stuff like that. You’re gonna buy it no matter what. They’re the only ones that can take a chance and say, “Hey, we’re gonna take a chance. We’re gonna start utilizing these better packagings instead of these other things.”

With few exceptions, Quadrant 4 participants believed they were powerless to act on their concerns and make positive changes to the environment through personal lifestyle choices. While

people in Quadrant 3 experienced this alienation as emotionally difficult, in Quadrant 4, people simply forced themselves to feel nothing and tended to locate responsibility for environmental protection outside the household. The average score that people in Quadrant 4 provided for their level of environmental concern is 3 out of 10.

Discussion

At the outset of this article, we posed the following question: *How do participants across a range of social class measures experience concern for the natural environment?* We specifically aim to add to an understanding of this question for lower status individuals, as this is especially lacking in the literature. We find, in the context of our sample, that generally, participants in higher social classes experience environmental concern in a way that is consistent with a broader sense of competency and control to positively shape the world around them, including the natural environment. Those in lower social classes experienced environmental concern in a way consistent with their broader sense of lacking power to influence their surroundings. The theoretical contributions of these findings are to explicate the relationship between class and concern in a way that showcases how power influences how people experience concern for the environment and to nudge the concept of environmental concern from an individual to a relational mode.

We explain the positive relationship between class and environmental concern by focusing on how power surrounds this association. First, we see evidence of power in the dominance of green consumption as the ideal type of household engagement in environmental protection. Akin to what cultural sociologists describe as “symbolic violence” (Wacquant 2004), past research suggests that actors in society with more capital establish their own tastes as the ideals. In the field of environmentalism, high-status actors value ethical consumption (Carfagna et al. 2014), particularly when consumption can be both ethical and sophisticated (Kennedy et al. 2018), as is the case when paying a cost premium for an eco-friendly car, reusable water bottle, or ethical meal. Second, as demonstrated by Michael Strand and Omar Lizardo (2015), beliefs do not precede actions, they are produced in dialogue with actions. Those who cannot act on dominant ideals for environmental protection are likely to adjust their environmental concern to align with their pro-environmental actions. This, too, is an illustration of power, because the ability to perceive oneself as capable of pursuing a course of action is a function of one’s perceived agency or self-efficacy (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

In environmental sociology, we define concern as awareness of issues, affinity for solutions, and perceived self-efficacy to contribute to solutions (Dunlap and Jones 2002). We suggest this definition inadvertently associates environmental concern and social class, particularly when green consumption is the ideal form of engagement in environmental protection. The concern that environmental social scientists have measured to date may be better defined as a relational and embodied awareness of the dependence of human flourishing on a healthy natural environment combined with an alignment with high-status preferences for environmental actions and positive self-evaluation of one’s role in mitigating environmental problems. With this definition in hand, we suggest that environmental concern is positively associated with social class because privileged actors in society have the power and legitimacy to define the ideal modes of engagement in environmental protection (green consumption) and, concomitantly, have the capacity to align their own actions with these ideals. Because actions and beliefs are dialectically related, those who can act on their environmental concerns in ways recognized as legitimate are able to evaluate their concern as high.

Our findings also push environmental social scientists to conceive of environmental concern as a relational, rather than individual, concept. That is, past research seeks to understand the development of environmental concern as a function of individual’s level of education, political ideology, gender, and income (e.g., Dietz et al. 1998). In our study, particularly for participants

that we located in Quadrant 3 (high volume of capital, relatively more cultural than economic capital), their social networks were comprised of people who relate to the environment in similar ways. If eco-powerlessness is the common sentiment among those with little social status, this partially explains the alienation and frustration Hochschild (2016) finds among her respondents with those who identify as environmentalists or privilege the environment above social concerns such as jobs. These identities, understood here as motivated by an eco-habitus, are privileged identities, only readily accessible to people with high stores of cultural capital. We have shown that pro-environmental sentiments are not rare; however, it seems that only the privileged have the cultural tastes (as indicated by the eco-habitus), time, and money to motivate their engagement in personal actions to protect the environment—and that they relate to others who experience the environment in similar ways.

Finally, our study builds on Norgaard's rich work on the social organization of denial. Norgaard's (2011) middle-class participants described a sense of powerlessness in the face of climate change specifically. In our research, we look at environmental concern more generally, and our focus is on how sociological research on concern tends to overlook the nuanced interactions between status, efficacy, and the way environmental concerns are expressed by our participants. By examining a sample that is more socioeconomically heterogeneous, and studying environmental concern in a context where consumer responses to environmental problems are dominant, we both support and extend Norgaard's research. Our interviews with participants in Quadrant 2 mirror patterns in Norgaard's book regarding their fears about environmental issues. However, our data suggest that actors in Quadrants 1 and 2 do take actions in response to their concerns and feel a sense of pride in those actions, while Norgaard's participants conveyed inertia in the face of climate change. One possible suggestion for this discrepancy is that in our study, green consumption is a valued approach to environmental protection that is largely perceived as accessible to privileged participants. That is, green consumption offers high-status actors a safe passage through the uncertainty of ecological crises. In this paper, we extend Norgaard's research by showing how lower class actors experience their society's value for green consumption. Participants in Quadrants 3 and 4 conveyed sentiments similar to Norgaard's middle-class subjects: that environmental issues were too painful to think about, so they cast them aside. Again, we argue that this is because our lower-class participants felt that they were failing to live up to green consumer ideals and that this sense of a reduced capacity to act on environmental concerns is what is reflected in their low self-reported environmental concern.

One practical implication of this study is that limiting environmental concern to the tastes and experiences of high-status actors may undermine the goal of ecological movements to catalyze a broad base of actors to demand a better environment. There is evidence that individual-level pro-environmental behaviors are associated with more collective engagement in environmental protection (Baumann, Engman, and Johnston 2015; Willis and Schor 2012). Our evidence suggests that some people feel excluded from participation in this potential "gateway" to more extensive forms of environmental engagement and environmental identity. This might be because they feel a lack of self-efficacy, are uncomfortable with a focus on environmental issues that excludes attention to social impacts, and/or because of uncertainty about which courses of action are effective. This sense of exclusion could impede broader collective environmental efforts, increase the already divisive nature of environmental issues (Burningham and Thrush 2003; Hochschild 2016), and serve as a mechanism by which inequality is produced and reproduced (Anantharaman 2018; Schor et al. 2016).

A noted limitation of our study is the racial and geographical homogeneity of our sample. While survey research is essential in tracking broad patterns of environmental concern across diverse populations (Givens and Jorgenson 2011; Stern, Dietz, and Kalof 1993), qualitative methods enable us to explore more nuanced understandings of concern, such as the roles of culture and power, explored here. While our results are not intended to be generalizable to more

diverse populations in different contexts, it is important to understand the relationship between class and concern in specific contexts, especially because we argue cultural context matters. Current research on race and the environment finds variation in green consumption behaviors even when controlling for economic status indicators (e.g., Sunter, Castellanos, and Kammen 2019) and reports misunderstandings of the relationship between race and environmental concern (Pearson et al. 2018). Thus, it will clearly be important for future research to explore whether patterns similar to what we find exist in other contexts, where status may be tied to race and ethnicity, sexuality, and other axioms of inequality that are beyond the scope of this paper. A better understanding of relationships between environmental concern and status in multiple contexts may help us to create an identity of environmentalism and actions for the environment that are both more inclusive and more effective for achieving a just sustainability.

We offer a few specific suggestions for future research. First, given that much research on concern uses survey data, we encourage scholars to consider the possibility that environmental concern scores on general population surveys may reflect a person's self-efficacy and broader sense of power as much (or more) than measuring their knowledge of issues and value for the natural environment. Our data point to this possibility. Second, we hope to see qualitative scholarship building on our study by examining populations that are more diverse, as noted above, to continue to contribute to an understanding of our current environmental context that is less divisive, more inclusive, and more empowering for a broader proportion of the population. Third, although we focused on patterns across class where political identity did not seem to be a salient driver of differences, future research could more carefully unpack political contrasts within the impulse of eco-powerlessness. And, finally, it would be fruitful to explore the relationship between religion and the eco-powerless/eco-habitus divide.

Conclusion

Our research aimed to catalyze a renewed consideration of the relationship between social class and environmental concern. Our analyses of 64 interviews conducted with socioeconomically diverse residents of Washington state suggest an alternative way to interpret research, suggesting lower class people are less concerned about the environment than higher class people. We do not find a *lack* of concern about the environment among lower class participants, but rather a strong sense of "eco-powerlessness" in comparison with other participants. This concept is complementary to but distinct from the idea of self-efficacy in that the sense of powerlessness extends to a general and relational feeling of resignation, rather than strictly an assessment of one's own capabilities. We present our focus on eco-powerlessness as a contrast to recent work on an emerging "eco-habitus" identified especially within members of higher social classes. In the context of environmental concern, an eco-habitus is expressed as a deep sense of connection to the earth, a sense of responsibility to protect the earth, and the individual and collective ability to do so. Our research contributes to a more culturally nuanced understanding of environmental concern by articulating the association between low cultural capital and a sense of powerlessness to effect positive environmental change.

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Notes

1. While ecologists and atmospheric scientists were aware of and concerned about climate change before the 1980s, the general population is now more cognizant of climate change, although the topic is certainly polarized in the United States.
2. There is some dispute on the definition of cultural capital (Besbris and Khan 2017). For the purposes of this paper, we follow Lamont and Lareau (1988:156) in understanding cultural capital as, “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion.” Note that attitudes are part of cultural capital and that tastes must be widely shared and characteristic of elite groups to denote this form of capital.
3. Thomas M. Laidley’s (2013a) approach is modeled after Holt’s (1998) study on cultural capital among U.S. consumers. Income intervals were given the following points: \$0 to \$14,999 = +2; \$15,000 to \$29,999 = +4; \$30,000 to \$44,999 = +6; \$45,000 to \$59,999 = +9; \$60,000 to \$74,999 = +12; \$75,000 to \$89,999 = +15; \$90,000 to \$104,999 = +19; \$105,000 to \$119,999 = +24; \$120,000+ = +30. These figures reflect income per person in the household, thus, a participant earning \$100,000 who is the sole income-earner with a partner and has two dependent children would have an “income per person” of \$25,000. Homeowners were given +12 points, while those with mortgages were given +6, and renters given +0. We categorized participants as low or high economic capital (LEC; HEC). LEC are those whose scores are between 0 and 25, and HEC are between 26 and 51. We also used evidence of economic capital from the interviews and from participants’ self-assessed status, in some cases where the score straddled a boundary.
4. Laidley’s (2013a) measure is based on educational attainment. Because we have data on occupational status, we use this information as well. Following Laidley, we scored educational attainment with the following points: PhD = +15; master’s = +9; bachelor’s, trade school, or some college = +6; high school = +3; and less than high school = +0. We derived a measure of occupational attainment from Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus’s (1992) work on occupational status. Following their work, we assigned points in the following way: higher cultural = +15; lower cultural/artists/higher technical = +12; lower technical/higher managerial/higher sales/skilled service = +9; lower managerial/clerical/lower sales = +6; semiskilled transport/laborer/protective services/farmer = +3; unskilled service = +0. We organized participants into low and high cultural capital (LCC; HCC). LCC are those whose scores are between 0 and 15, and HCC are between 16 and 30. We also used evidence of cultural capital from the interviews (particularly mentions of parents’ education) and from participants’ self-assessed status in cases where the score sat on the boundary between the two designations.

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