

Moving to the Recycling Wonderland? Cross-Cultural Discussions on Opportunities for Better/Worse Environmental Practices

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This paper investigated long-term changes of environmental consciousness and recycling behavior with considerations of different levels of contextual factors in the United States and Germany. A mixed-method, qualitative inquiry was used to examine whether and how relocation had an impact on people's ecological thinking and behavior in their everyday life. Forty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews in two groups: Americans who moved to Munich and Germans who moved to New York City. Most interviews were conducted in interviewees' homes. Pictures were taken inside the apartment, common areas of the building, and recycling containers in public spaces to help determine recycling accessibility.

Different from existing behavioral change studies which mostly focused on interventions and short-term effects, this research examined both spatial and temporal factors in wider spectra. When people move to another country, most of the individual characteristics (demographics and personal traits) do not change, which increase the explanation power of contextual (situational) factors on conceptual and behavioral change.

This research broadly defined and discussed "changes" in three different aspects: 1. Perceived changes: participants' self reports on behavioral and conceptual changes in the host country; 2. Reflected changes: people reflected on their changes when they visited their home countries after relocation; 3. Predicted changes: participants were asked to imagine their own changes after moving back to their home country. The author hypothesized people's recycling behavior will change after relocating to another country, and the direction of changes will depend on the supportiveness of the host country.

Contextual factors in different domains were found to be important for people's behavioral change: immediate physical environment (number, shape, distance of garbage and recycling containers), available information (labels on the containers, brochures and flyers distributed), social support, economic incentives, and political environment. Results showed that different domains of contextual factors constantly penetrated each other: policy disparities between the two cities influenced the perceptions of accessible recycling resources. Different social milieus also affected people's awareness of existing policies. Even when recycling information and opportunities are available, people's behaviors are likely to be influenced by the larger context of cultures and sometimes stereotypes: Germans recycled less after moving to New York due to lack of social support, inconsistent recycling opportunities, and distrust in American government on implementing environmental policies. On the other hand, Americans learned to recycle more and engaged in more pro-environmental activities because of the strong and consistent environmental-friendly practices in Germany. Finally, relocation served as a stimulus for people to re-examine and re-define their past experiences as well as to realize their environmental consciousness. This research confirmed the importance of contextual factors in people's recycling behavioral change and concluded that a comprehensive environmental-friendly culture is significant to modify people's attitudes and behavior.