

Yvonne Russell

Intergenerational responsibility and justice in global environmental protection

The motives of environmentally relevant behavior with respect to the climate were examined in a questionnaire study (N = 353). In this study, the motive of ecological responsibility, which has often been empirically confirmed, is applied to a new context, namely, the potential beneficiaries of environmentally protective behavior and related to the protection of the present generation, the next generation, and a generation 100 years from now. In addition, the relevance of the belief that the present generation is unjustly burdening future generations was investigated.

The results show that the responsibility of the present generation toward future ones as discussed in literature on environmental ethics are not only ethical demands, but are actually conceded by the general population. Respondents admitted that the present generation unjustly burdens future generations with processes which emit carbon dioxide. This opinion is remarkable because perceived injustice to one's own advantage causes feelings of guilt, and the complexity of the workings of the ecological system can easily be used to put this feeling of injustice into perspective or to construct an intergenerational justice view to serve one's own purpose. In addition to this, ecological responsibility is accepted not only toward the present-day generation but also toward future generations, irrespective of whether one has children or not. The acceptance of responsibility for the protection of the present generation and the next generation are stronger predictors of environmentally protective behavior than the acceptance of responsibility for the protection of a generation 100 years from now.

This pattern of results indicates a morally influenced attitude toward environmental problems affecting the present and future generations, an attitude which is especially pronounced for generations closer to the present one rather than later generations.