

Individualized environmental responsibility and complexity in Sweden

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Abstract

This article discusses the individualization of environmental responsibility and the requirements to reflect on the environmental consequences of everyday activities. This is done in relation to the idea that awareness of environmental risks and problems will influence environmental activities. 64 Swedish householders' everyday life and sustainable activities has been investigated in a multidisciplinary, qualitative study. By interacting with intricate socio-technical systems in order to live everyday life, these householders can affect and are affected by the environment in near and distant places, and the focus is on how the householders conceive of these influences and their responsibility for the environment. The discussion will be run in relation to a set of categories concerning the ways the householders described environmental problems. The article shows that the householders know of environmental problems and risks, and believe they have a personal responsibility, which they mainly take by recycling. But the article also discusses arguments about why the householders do not act pro-environmentally. The theoretical discussion is run in relation to reflexivity and risk society, and the conclusions are related to the challenges that complexity poses to the possibility to reflect on the environmental consequences and to act pro-environmentally.

Key words

environmental problems; risk; responsibility; action competence; complexity; risk society

Introduction

There is growing concern about the state of the environment. Since environmental problems are believed to be caused by human action it is important to study the factors that influence environmental behaviour. During the last decades there has been a shift in focus from mainly end-of-pipe solutions for industries, to requirements for

individuals to change everyday practices concerning transportation, consumption and recycling to decrease the negative impact on environment (UNCED, 1993; MEADOWCROFT, 2002). This indicates an individualization and privatization of responsibility (SEGERBERG, 2005), where people are expected to change household practices, and keep up to date on the environmental consequences of

their actions (MACGREGOR 2006). Householders are connected to a myriad of socio-technical systems, which make it difficult to survey the environmental consequences of everyday activities. Yet, surveying the environmental consequences and take moral and practical responsibility for these is what is required from individuals in many environmental theories (DOBSON, 2003; SEGERBERG, 2005; LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2008; BECK, 1996). However, people might deny environmental responsibility because of lack of possibilities, lack of foreseeable consequences of their actions, or reduce their own responsibility by attributing responsibility to others (LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2006; UZZELL, 2000).

Due to the concern about the environmental state, many studies aim at increasing the understanding about how to get people to act more pro-environmentally. While some studies attempt to confirm relationships between environmental values and behaviour (THØGERSEN, 2002; NORDLUND & GARVILL, 2002), others try to understand the context in which risks and problems are interpreted and discussed and how this influence performance (LIDSKOG ET AL. 2003; BRAND, 1997; LUNDGREN, 2000). In the later studies awareness and informational campaigns have played a prominent role in the discussions of what motivates people to act more pro-environmentally.

In previous research the relationship between proximate and distant problems and risks has received attention (MEADOWCROFT, 2002; UZZELL, 2000). A study found that global environmental problems are perceived to be more serious the farther away they are from the perceiver, at the same time as people considered themselves to be least responsible for solving what is perceived as global environmental problems (UZZELL, 2000). A Swedish study of priorities and allocation of responsibility for sustainable development at different levels performed by Lindström and Küller (2008) shows that most of the sustainable development issues were perceived as more important to the world than to the municipality or to the family. The same study showed that concerning the respondents' own private actions connected to sustainable development some said they intended to decrease the car usage, increase bicycle usage, save energy and water, cultivate vegetables themselves, recycle more, become more aware as a consumer, and decrease their consumption (LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2008:329), which are all examples of individual ways to take responsibility. However, the authors also mentioned that the expression

“these issues are so big—what can we do?” were fairly common (LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2008:329), which directs the attention to the scale and action competence. In this context pedagogical research which has shown that there is no linear relationship between increased knowledge and awareness, and pro-environmental behaviour, is relevant (SHANAHAN ET AL. 2003; BARR, 2002; PALOJOKI, 1997). Knowledge has to be meaningful for the householders, and contribute with relevant activity suggestions (BARR, 2002; PALOJOKI, 1997). The “experience effect” further tends to improve the incorporation of new pro-environmental activities (SHANAHAN ET AL. 2003:2).

The focus on lifestyle changes has implied that attention has turned to how people act in the private sphere, what is here called the household. Since a household can be composed of one or several individuals, who may have diverging interests, the concept householder should be used (SKILL, 2008). A contextual approach concern how all everyday practices are carried out during everyday life, and how sustainable practices fit into the picture (MACGREGOR, 2006).

The aim of this article is to discuss the ways the Swedish householders express their concern about environmental problems and risk, how they have come to know about the problems and risks, and how they act in relation to their perceived responsibility. In international comparisons of national policies for environmental sustainability, Sweden usually ranks high (CASIMIR & DUTILH, 2003). How Swedes think about their responsibility and how they conceive of environmental problems can thereby have a wider relevance in comparison to other countries, since they may aim at reaching a similar level. However, comparing countries can be difficult due to different interpretations, based on the acquaintance with environmental problems and cultural context (LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2008). In a recent cross-country study on car use De Groot and Steg (2007) highlight that behaviour is also influenced by national structural characteristics in the five countries they investigated including Sweden, such as the availability and quality of various travel modes, level of congestion, or spatial structure, which may activate different values when considering car use. Institutional and physical contextualisations are relevant, since it connects not just what the householders expressed that they should do, but also what they believed they *can* do which is influenced by enabling systems (SKILL, 2008). It is argued that the results of the present study have wider relevance since complexity as

a challenge for the possibility to reflect on the environmental consequences of everyday activities occur in other national contexts as well.

The article is outlined as follows: the first section is devoted to previous studies of how people understand environmental problems and risks, how the material has been collected and analysed, and the theoretical points of departure concerning risk society, reflexivity and individualization of environmental responsibility. In the second section the material from the interviews with the Swedish householders is described. Two excerpts are used as illustrations of typical ways that the householders expressed themselves. Third and finally, the results are discussed and some conclusions drawn about how the householders perceive of their environmental responsibility in our current complex society.

Assessment and understanding of problems and risks

If a person leaves a plastic bag on the street and litter, it is easy to say who is liable for the problem to arise. It is more difficult to connect a single trip by car and its emissions to any noticeable climate change, like rising sea levels. Environmental problems and risks can thereby be of different complexity, in the sense that they stretch out in time and space, sometimes making it difficult to estimate responsibility and liability for both the cause and solution of the problems.

Here it is central to discuss the relationship between environmental risks and problems. While problems exist here and now, risks concern future estimated problems. Different groups of people can assess risks differently, and there is no direct relationship between the calculated risks and the assessment: while some risks are overestimated, others are underestimated. People who live closer to risk tend to deny the risk to a larger extent than people living farther away and under less risk (UZZELL, 2000; LEISEROWITZ, 2006). The assessment of risks and environmental problems is based on the available information and knowledge, and it can be founded on different rationalities (FISCHER, 2003). The fact that people tend to worry more about risks that they have no control over, has led scholars to promote empowerment (LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2008), which is in line with demands for wide public participation as expressed in *Agenda 21* (UNCED, 1993).

Individual perceptions of environmental problems should be understood in relation to wider social and cultural processes (MEADOWCROFT, 2002), where knowledge of environmental problems and risks are disputed, legitimated and

constructed among human actors in which mass media and science often play a role (HANNIGAN, 1995; LIDSKOG ET AL. 2003). However, just like Bickerstaff and Walker argue, environmental problems have materiality and an ontologically objective existence: “but that the conception and classification of [them] are socially contingent ... the ways in which people (including scientists and politicians) come to know and make sense of [them] are always socially mediated” (BICKERSTAFF & WALKER, 2003:46). Taking a social constructivist perspective on environmental problems and risks accentuates interaction.

Complexity and communication in a globalized world

Several scholars have stressed how the world has become characterized by the compression of time and space, which in turn has contributed to a changed notion of near and far (GIDDENS, 1994; DOBSON, 2003; MEADOWCROFT, 2002). Decisions in everyday life can have global environmental consequences and—the converse—global phenomena can have an impact on people’s everyday lives. Since environmental problems do not necessarily respect political boundaries and can cut across established jurisdictions it becomes interesting to discuss what the relevant community is. The moral obligations of individual citizens to the political community have been discussed for centuries.

Making the general public aware of near and distant environmental effects of everyday behaviour concerns environmental communication (PALM, 2006; cf. CARSON, 1962). Awareness raising of problems are sometimes connected to suggestions for actions to improve the situation. Directly perceiving environmental problems and risks is often considered the main motivation for environmentally friendly behaviour, and is assumed to inform how people make decisions for how to act, since people are assumed to act mainly out of self-interest (ELIASOPH, 1998; PATEMAN, 1970). The idea about how egoistic and altruistic feelings motivate environmental activities is further central in green theory (DOBSON, 2003; BERGLUND & MATTI, 2006), which has led scholars to suggest that alterations of scales and redefinitions of problems can be a strategy in environmental communication (MEADOWCROFT, 2002:173). With this point of departure it becomes important to reveal how environmental problems are made relevant to care for, for example by suggestions on how to take individual action.

Risk and threat are theoretically connected

to the discussion of trust and of whose descriptions people believe. This concerns people's trust in their own and others ability to gain knowledge of problems, and to manage or decrease risks and solve problems (BECK, 1996; FISCHER, 2003). In this context it is of importance to distinguish between feeling threatened by environmental problems and expressing awareness of, and knowledge about, environmental risks (GYBERG, 2003). With the help of technology humans have learned to predict and manage some of the natural disasters, but in other cases it is technology that is considered to cause the problem (BECK, 1992; MEADOWCROFT, 2002). Thereby technology plays an ambiguous role in environmental problems and risks.

The relationship between trust and doubt are prominent in theoretical discussions of the risk society (BECK, 1992), which has influenced many environmental studies. The risk society theory stipulates that the public to increasing extents recognizes environmental dangers that go along with industrial and technological developments (BECK, 1992). The individualization of environmental responsibility stresses the individual capacity to ponder and reflect on the consequences of everyday activities (BECK, 1996). Nevertheless, it is probably impossible to ponder the entire environmental impact of each and every activity posed by the "multiplicity of abstract systems" (GIDDENS, 1994:89), and the inherent complexity of the environmental effects of human activities. According to Giddens, the opportunities to exert control—lacking in our complex society—is replaced by trust and confidence in systems (GIDDENS, 1991). Anyone who attended to environmental risks all the time would most likely be considered to have a mental disorder (GIDDENS, 1996). Subduing risks and trusting others is thus a viable strategy in contemporary society as a way of dealing with or managing risk and uncertainty in our everyday lives. In conclusion it is possible to characterize the society that Giddens portrays as a trust society, while Beck pictures a risk society, even if it is acknowledged that they share many similarities in their theoretical contributions.

Methods for studying householders' everyday life

Households contribute to environmental stress in several ways (MIES & SHIVA, 1993). In this article a Swedish case study is used in order to analyze the relationship between knowledge and perceptions of environmental problems among householders, and how it influences their activities

as responsible actors. A case study is suitable for a complex study that aims at grasping many aspects of a phenomenon (YIN, 2003). The present account is based on materials from 48 semi-structured interviews with Swedish householders performed during 2004-2006 with a total of 64 individuals. Respondents of different ages and sexes were recruited, as well as households with varying numbers, and usually all members of the households participated in the interview. The aim was not to recruit environmental activists. It is a qualitative ethnographic study which interprets how this group of Swedes argue. I will describe the householders' interpretations of environmental problems that they shared through the interviews and how they differ between various types of problems. The methodological approach was to ask the householders about the environmental problems they thought existed; then to follow up by asking whether they believed there was anything they could do in their households to counteract these problems. By using this approach the householders shared information on possibilities and constraints to act pro-environmentally, i.e. how concern about the environment was transferred into actions or not.

Talking about environmental problems and risks

Categorizing environmental problems

The capacity to notice environmental changes, and determine what is environmentally destructive, deals with a pedagogical process where the householders can either use their own knowledge to interpret nature and environmental changes, or trust the interpretations of others such as environmental activists, authorities, family members, scientists or media (LUNDGREN 2003; FISCHER 2003). Through the interviews with the householders focus was on how they talked about environmental problems, and how they motivated pro-environmental practices, which connect reflexivity and intentionality to the doing. The discursive aspect of reflexivity demands attention.

The descriptions given by the householders can be divided into three dyadic categories: visible versus invisible, local versus global and finally abstract versus materialized problems based on how they expressed how they came to perceive of them or notice them. In certain cases, these categories are equivalent, such as when an environmental problem is visible, local, and materialized, such as litter. The distinction between global and local problems was done by asking me to clarify the

question whether I was interested in “global” or “local” environmental problems, where the answer always was “both”. These are thereby empirical categories. After having clarified the question, the local environmental problems that they mentioned comprised litter, bad smell, smoke from neighbours’ chimneys, and household waste in the wrong place. A big preoccupation was with litter in general. Littering is here interpreted as a case of threat to order and “matter out of place” (cf. DOUGLAS, 2002), rather than damaged human health, for example. However, litter and plastics that end up in bodies of water, or get eaten by animals, are of course environmental problems, but none of the householders explained it in this way. This problem is obviously caused by humans, and especially the perceived “irresponsible others” that several of the householders described, who throw things from the car window or litter at recycling stations. The global problems mentioned were global warming, the ozone hole, acidification, eutrophication, reckless felling of the rain forest and desertification. Few mentioned “reckless felling” of forests in Sweden as a problem. Most householders said that “global” environmental problems appeared in distant places and decoupled them from one’s immediate environs and local context. These are problems that they generally do not feel they have experienced themselves but of which they know, and can talk about.

Some of the householders had increased levels of radon in their home. This could be one of the “nearest” environmental risks to imagine. The concern about risks connected with radon was low, and the householders explained how they had managed the risks by adjusting their homes (cf. UZZELL, 2000). To lead a good life the householders even described that they must accept certain risks, and that there are limits to what they are willing to do for an improved environment. They are not interested in sacrificing their good life in order to be safer. This implies that different values are posed against each other. I will shortly discuss the suggested activities that the householders claimed they do motivated by environmental concern.

Pesticides on fruit and vegetables were portrayed to pose health risks for workers, and children as consumers, but the quotidian use of chemicals *per se* was not regarded as implying any inherent risk. The reason that chemicals were perceived as less risky today was because it is possible to leave leftovers or containers at environmental stations where the authorities are believed to take care of them. In this sense Swedish authorities are trusted to do a good job generally.

Coming to pay attention to environmental problems and risks

Apart from analysing what kind of environmental problems the householders described, the way they have come to know about them and from whom, was analysed. Some environmental problems are difficult to perceive and notice, and then we have to rely on simplifications and others interpretations (FISCHER, 2003). It was common to say that they do not experience any tangible environmental problems. Poor air quality though, was an environmental problem that various householders who live in urban areas said affected them.

Householders who described how they had noticed changes in the environment like the absence of sensitive fish, dust between the windowpanes, and litter, can be distinguished from householders who mentioned learning about environmental problems like the reckless felling of the rainforest, and yet again from those who directly experienced them through headache or allergy. However, making a theoretical distinction between learning about, noticing, and perceiving environmental problems is difficult, since people may “experience” or see environmental problems through the mass media, where problems are depicted in a multitude of ways. For example, the media depict polar bears being threatened, present diagrams of quantified changes in pollution, and show people who get serious sunburn in regions where the ozone layer is thin. These interpretations of environmental changes may later influence how a person interpret something they read about, see with their own eyes, or experience as an environmental problem. When focusing on these interactions it is plausible to conclude that people learn what to attend to, and how to interpret the environment.

Mass media were described as a source of information concerning both problems and risks, but it was also portrayed as a conduit by which one is affected by manipulative advertising implying more consumption. Several householders expressed that we are fooled into desires for commodities that do not make us happier, desires that only contribute to the destruction of natural resources. This concerns the notion of a distinction between created desires and basic needs (cf. NAESS, 1981).

A point of departure in the literature is that becoming aware of environmental problems may lead to changes in behaviour to alleviate the problems. Some of the householders noticed environmental problems by paying attention to their materializations. Desiree, a girl in her early twenties gave an illustration of this and how it

interacted with her routines:

Desiree: I am not the kind of person who considers everything. But sometimes I wake up and think, oh my God, look at all the black stuff between my windowpanes! Am I really inhaling all that?

Interviewer: Have you thought about anything to do about it?

Desiree: Well, perhaps drive the car less. But at the same time you have to have enough money to buy an eco-car, and I don't.

Interviewer: Do you think that you are doing anything to reduce emissions?

Desiree: No, [laughs] not in the least! ... when you sit in your car and drive off, you think, everyone else has a car! It doesn't matter if I change my routines.

Her statement is firstly used to illustrate the intricacy in arguments that the interviews contributed with, going from driving less by car to the cost of an eco-car, to the justification of why she doesn't drive less. Secondly, her concern can be connected to her health since she has allergies, which clearly sensitized her to the environment. But as stated her noticing the materialization of the problem does not make her change her everyday practices. Quite a few of the householders discussed what was needed in order to change everyday behaviour, and how environmental problems and disasters could be motivational tools for change. Thereby they considered "eye-openers" as a way to instigate changed behaviour.

At the other hand some of the householders emphasized that environmental problems can be difficult to perceive since they are not visible, or because it is difficult to connect an individual activity with the environmental effects, like the negative environmental consequences of using the car (cf LINDSTRÖM & KÜLLER, 2008). In a similar vein some mentioned that there is a large distance between taking containers for recycling to the recycling station and noticing any environmental improvements in the air or at sea. However, it is questionable whether noticing such improvements will ever be possible, due to where the natural resources are extracted, processed, used, and recycled. However, this reflection did not stop them from believing that recycling was important, and it was an activity which all but one household perform.

Trust and how the situation has improved

Awareness of environmental risks and problems, and trust are intimately connected.

All householders in this study mentioned some environmental problems and risks, and only one of them said that he did not care about them. This showed that they knew how to talk about the problems, and that there existed concepts to reason about them. However, as already mentioned, it was uncommon for the householders to express perceptions of environmental threat. This section will focus on how many householders even expressed that environmental conditions has improved in Sweden, and the arguments they used to exemplify this. Several of the environmental problems were depicted to exist in other parts of the world, which the interviewees however expressed that they had a moral responsibility to care for, mainly through consumption choices. Environmental problems where thereby closely related to consumption and production processes. Transferring responsibility towards industries rather than household demand was a common phenomenon, which is here interpreted to mean that the householders relieved themselves of responsibility to some extent, even if all of them said humans create environmental problems collectively. This is interpreted to imply that if the production process is improved it is not harmful to desire and consume the products.

While quite a few of the householders argued that the state of the environment has got better in Sweden due to good management, a few were pessimistic. In the later case, it is consumer society itself that is threatening. Nevertheless, it was more common to place faith that industrial pollution is being managed and supervised correctly. It implies that the householders do not need to bother keeping informed on environmental problems, since the responsible authorities do. Present products were generally ascribed a low level of risk, while the householders opened up for the possibility that their knowledge of products and their contents might change. There were several expressions of how they trusted that Swedish authorities have looked out for them by removing bad products by making them illegal. In some cases, what was previously a problem has even been reinterpreted as a resource today, like recycling and district heating based on waste incineration, where the burning of waste turns into energy. What is at the centre, though, is that the risks and problems can be managed with the help of recycling, labelling schemes, and better energy sources. Since the problems and risks are manageable, it seems that they are not considered threatening. Furthermore, most of the studied householders trust the authorities and other actors to "look after them" and tell them about hazardous products and

processes. This implies that the individualization of responsibility and the need to constantly keep individually informed is shifted to others. Yet, through the householders' descriptions it proved important to be "conscious" about environmental problems that exist in the world, i.e. be able to talk about them, but concern was not necessarily transformed into acting more environmentally friendly.

How to take responsibility – and the challenge of complexity

By the use of technology and natural resources people can stretch out their ecological footprint in time and space, which in turn implies that it is difficult to monitor the effects of individual activities (WACKERNAGEL & REES, 1996). Environmental problems can further be a collective dilemma since it is the aggregate results of individual actions that cause many environmental problems, and some segments of society may affect the life chances of other groups of people.

The householders in this study were asked if they could influence the environmental problems they mentioned. Many householders justified environmentally friendly activities not by the fact that they are affected themselves, but out of concern for others i.e., animals or people. This means that it is not necessarily self-interest that motivates their concern, but that something has been made relevant to care for. From several descriptions it is obvious that caring about the environment and taking environmental responsibility was equated with recycling. Here it is important to give a more elaborate description of how the householders discussed recycling that has a lot to do with complexity. Many reasoned about the use of energy that recycling requires, due to the demand to wash the containers before leaving them at the recycling station, and how to measure the pros and cons of for example using the car when taking the recyclable goods to the recycling station due to the emissions. However, it seemed like the fact that there is a formal system for recycling makes them trust its usefulness for improving environmental conditions.

Another environmental choice the householders mentioned was to purchase ecologically labelled products. However, complexity is central even here. The answer that Vanja and Vilhelm gave, a couple in their forties with two children, is illustrative of how the householders in this study observe and interpret their surrounding society concerning for example environmental labels:

Vilhelm: But do we know that [the Swan label is good]? We checked and the phosphorous in the detergent that was prohibited in Germany was not prohibited in Sweden. People who are not connected to a water treatment plant, like us, should use detergent without phosphorous. But I have no clue about whether or not our detergent contains phosphorous. Of course, it is possible to read the label. ...

Vanja: No, because to a certain extent you trust that it is good if there is a label like that on it. Then you trust it, even if you don't know exactly what it means.

Since one ingredient in the detergent is allowed in one country but not the other, it makes them ponder on the actual environmental impact. A similar discussion concerned the relationship between consuming environmentally labelled products and the quantities they used. Does the amount matter if I use detergent which is environmentally labelled? This directs the attention to the complexity in everyday activities at very detailed levels, and on what rationality to base a decision that something is pro-environmental, or more/less environmental in comparison to something else. While some labels indicate that the product is less damaging than others, others indicate that they are inherently "good". This was not something the interviewees discussed however. The householders emphasized that purchasing ecologically labelled products is an important way to help improve environmental conditions. Several women described how they buy organic vegetables for their children since it is believed to be healthier, and that they trust the labels even if they never investigated the full implication of what the labelling implies, which is illustrated in the quotation above. In this sense an existing system, like a labelling scheme, can contribute by creating a simplification of complexity. This is one out of many several examples that the householders expressed concerning how to judge what is least environmentally damaging among everyday activities.

In this context it was further possible to notice an idea about interchangeability of different everyday activities with environmental effects. If they do something which is considered as environmentally bad, like driving their car extensively, it is possible to correct this by performing some good activities, like purchasing organic products or recycling. This notion is interesting since it connects the knowledge about one's environmental influence and how to transform it to practice – and how to reason and

justify activities. It appears that the householders have decided to perform certain activities to reduce their negative impact on the environment, even though they are not completely sure of their effectiveness due to difficulties to completely grasp complexity. However, the focus on how the householders simplified complexity by performing a set of environmentally sound activities has to be related to their expression that there is a limit to what they are willing to do.

Discussion – awareness, reflection and trust

Late modern society has created potentially immense environmental risks and problems. The requirement placed on individuals to keep up to date and reflect on the environmental consequences, and to be able to justify actions and choices, is part of this society (GIDDENS 1994; BECK 1996; SEGERBERG 2005). This article has focused on the individual responsibility for the environmental problems and risks as perceived by Swedish householders. The interviewees have expressed that they have a certain responsibility both for the creation of environmental problems, as well as for their mitigation. The present study indicates that by performing a few environmental friendly motivated activities, mainly recycling household waste, the Swedish householders relieve themselves of bad conscience concerning an area they feel morally obliged and responsible to care for. However, what at a first glance may seem like better alternatives, such as recycling or buying an eco-car, can turn out to be complex and difficult to decide on due to the multitude of details that are involved, and depending on what a specific choice is compared to. A way of dealing with the complexity of contemporary society is to trust others' judgment instead of keeping up to date, or to trust that other actors like authorities are looking out for you and tell you if something is dangerous. From this perspective it seems more accurate to speak about a trust society than a risk society.

Several of the environmental problems in Sweden are manageable problems in the sense that the householders translate the awareness of problems into action. Material structures like eco-labels and recycling depots help the householders in a certain way, even if it is not enough with an existing system – there are plenty of bicycle lanes without necessarily everyone using them. The incorporation of pro-environmental activities is not only related to trust, but also to what is considered “reasonable” to lead a good life without sacrificing too much.

In most discussions about environmental problems in our current Western society, the transnational aspect of the problems is mentioned. This implies that people are expected to consider the environmental effects of their activities more or less wherever they arise (DOBSON, 2003). In this study the householders asked specifically if I was interested in “local” or “global” problems. The study shows many similarities with a Swedish study of public perceptions performed by Lindström and Küller (2008) concerning the expression of moral considerations, the suggestions for what they believed they could contribute with, and the impression that global environmental issues are complex to deal with. It seems plausible to argue that it is not necessarily about physically near problems and risks, but rather about the way environmental problems are made “relevant” and how they are connected to activities to perform that people can contribute with, that matters.

The householders interviewed in this study could describe and discuss several environmental problems and consequences of individual activities. At the same time as it seemed important for them to show that they are “environmentally conscious” and know of relationships between cause and environmental effects, the complexity can be an obstacle to knowing how to act more environmentally friendly. The difficulties in measuring different choices against each other can result in confusion or even passivity when it comes to carry out environmentally sound activities, even if it is important to highlight that they have decided to perform some specific activities such as recycling and purchase ecologically labelled products.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this article has been to describe and analyze how awareness about environmental deterioration and environmental risk are related to pro-environmental everyday household activities. The studied householders were able to describe and talk about environmental problems about which they had learned, and which they had a discursive consciousness about. In this present study it has sometimes been the householders' individual health which has been the motivation to care for the environment, or the health of their children, but more often the concern for others was expressed, which goes along with the notion that global environmental problems appear in distant places and does not affect them. The article has shown that the householders have limited time and interest to find and scrutinize all different choices, but also, and equally interesting, that it is

difficult to decide how to measure what choice is the most environmentally sound. Complexity is then a challenge to action competence.

Complexity has both served as a point of departure for this article, as well as it forms part of the conclusions. Complexity is a central issue since it can be difficult to know what the “best” environmentally motivated activities, due to different rationalities that the measurement is based on. It is by simplifying complexity, and through enabling structures, like recycling depots and labelling schemes, that the householders can “go on” with their everyday lives. The article has showed that householders expressed that there were opportunities for them to manage the risks and problems that arise as a consequence of our everyday lives. The householders showed that they can indeed be aware of environmental problems and risks without doing something to change the situation. Even if it seemed very important for them to help recycle and not to litter, they accept certain risks to live a “good life”. That fact that awareness about environmental problems and risks are not enough for starting to incorporate pro-environmental practices is not a completely novel conclusion, since it has been emphasized in research on empowerment and action competence. The results indicate the environmental communication should focus on how to deal with complexity, and how to judge what is more and less environmentally friendly at detailed levels in everyday household activities. Another conclusion concerns that the householders expect that the authorities are looking out for them, and tell them if something involves environmental risks, or create systems that can manage environmental problems like the recycling systems or labelling schemes.

This makes it more accurate to talk about a trust society, than a risk society.

Notes

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Karin Skill received her PhD in Technology and social change at a multi-disciplinary department at Linköping University in September 2008. In 2003 she received her master's degree in applied anthropology and history. She has mainly focused on sustainable development and change through her research, and she has an interest in intercultural pedagogy and postcolonial theory. Since September 2008 she is employed at the Department for Management and Engineering (IEI), and she also teaches at the Environmental Science Programme. During 2009 she is performing a field study in Argentina about how environmental organizations create and communicate environmental responsibility.