

## **Denial and the Process of Moral Exclusion in Environmental Conflict**

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*Environmental issues present an urgent challenge throughout the world. Air, water, and land pollution continue at alarming rates and increasingly strain the Earth's capacity to sustain healthy ecosystems and human life. Although technological and behavioral aspects of environmental conflict are often salient, this article contributes to the literature on environmentalism by examining moral orientations that underlie and fuel environmental conflict. The centerpiece of this article describes three kinds of denial in environmental conflict: (1) outcome severity; (2) stakeholder inclusion; and (3) self-involvement. Like intermeshed gears, these forms of denial actively advance the process of moral exclusion. The article concludes with implications of this analysis for theory and practice.*

Environmental issues present an urgent challenge throughout the world. Air, water, and land pollution continue at alarming rates and increasingly strain the Earth's capacity to sustain healthy ecosystems and human life. Although marked improvements in environmental quality have been documented in the United States for certain pollutants, additional questions, concerns, and conflicts continue to arise over the current state of the environment locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. For example, pedestrians and bus drivers dispute the prolonged idling of diesel engines in downtown business districts; a neighborhood challenges a proposed siting for an incinerator or power plant; the U.S. Environmental

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Protection Agency battles industry groups over appropriate quality standards; and around the world, nations that were parties to the 1997 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto, Japan, struggle with marketplace forces to lower emissions of greenhouse gases.

Although technological and behavioral aspects of environmental conflict are often salient, this article describes subtle moral orientations that underlie the process of environmental conflict (cf. Clayton & Opotow, 1994). It offers an analysis of three forms of denial, discussing each in the context of air quality conflicts. These forms of denial advance self-serving moral justifications, exclusionary attitudes, structural change in the conflict, conflict escalation, and destructive conflict outcomes. Understanding environmental conflict, moral exclusion, and the contribution of denial to both is crucial for constructively managing conflict process.

### Environmental Conflict

Conflicts result from behavioral or attitudinal incompatibilities as parties bring distinctive worldviews to conflicts that include their interests, positions, culture, beliefs, tactics, skills, needs, values, and perceptions of fairness (Deutsch, 1973). Conflicts can be obvious or hidden, constructive or destructive, and occur at smaller and larger contexts, from within individuals to international conflicts. Conflicts are often precipitated by as well as precipitate changes that include modifications in positions and attitudes, enlarging or narrowing of issues, and the mix of engaged stakeholders (Mather & Yngvesson, 1980–81). Morton Deutsch (1973) has identified the influential relationship between conflict processes and conflict outcomes. He proposes that positive conflict processes, such as cooperation, promote constructive conflict outcomes, whereas negative conflict processes, such as disrespect, distrust, and miscommunication, promote destructive conflict outcomes. Although all conflicts share these characteristics, *environmental conflicts* as a class have some distinctive characteristics. Promoting *environmentalism*—an environmentally protective stance and behavior—depends on an understanding of environmental conflict.

#### *Large Scale*

Environmental conflicts are unusually large scale and complex. They involve large numbers of people (often millions). These human stakeholders can differ substantially from each other in perceptions of risk, time horizons, and value and as well as in their access to power and political and economic resources (Susskind, 1981). Environmental conflicts involve complex systems that include regulatory bodies, proximate and distal parties, individuals and groups, and future stakeholders. In addition they involve nonhuman natural systems that remain

incompletely understood (Susskind & Field, 1996). Because of the large numbers and diversity of human and nonhuman animate and inanimate stakeholders (e.g., rivers, etc.), environmental conflicts are often representation disputes debating who should be identified as valid spokespersons for specific positions and interests.

### *The Commons*

Environmental conflicts concern shared resources (e.g., the watershed, the air, land use) and harms (e.g., pollution), evoking the dynamic of the commons. Garrett Hardin (1968) describes how shared space lends itself to environmental tragedy when the costs of overutilization accrue at the macro level but not the micro level. Adding sheep to the common benefits an individual sheep owner, but when widely adopted as a practice, leads to overgrazing and degradation of the common.

### *Specialized Knowledge*

Environmental conflicts depend on the interpretation of scientific and technical data. This often results in two classes of stakeholders: those with and those without sufficient knowledge to interpret these data. Relatedly, environmental conflicts result from and shape public policies involving government agencies and formal regulatory decision-making processes. Some stakeholders are more knowledgeable about the complex array of regulatory mechanisms than others.

Throughout the article we will illustrate our analysis with examples of air quality conflict. This approach not only offers a coherent focus but also illustrates the three main characteristics of environmental conflict:

1. *Large scale:* The airshed is shared and needed by everyone. It also has limits on its use if it is to be maintained at a particular level or quality. Geographically the airshed is also large scale. Air pollutants can travel hundreds of miles; consequently, geographic areas that may not have a localized air pollution problem contribute to problems experienced downwind.
2. *Commons:* Air pollution results from micro and macro behaviors. Although major industrial sources contribute to the air pollution problem, so do an individual's activities. Adding a few small sources of polluting emissions yields nonenvironmental benefits (i.e., convenience) and minimal environmental impacts for an individual, factory, or community at the micro level, but as emissions accumulate from many sources, impact on the airshed can be substantial and harmful.
3. *Specialized knowledge:* Monitoring air quality and interpreting these data takes specialized equipment, knowledge, and skills. Although clean air is

critically important for public health, we neither see the air nor certain forms of pollution. Air pollution remains invisible to the public until it has reached unacceptable proportions, as in Los Angeles on a smoggy day. Long-term human costs of air pollution are also difficult for ordinary citizens to detect. They are, however, evident in chronic, debilitating respiratory and pulmonary disease. On a hospital pulmonary ward, where breathing can no longer be taken for granted, the effects of day-to-day air pollution are obvious, dramatic, and frightening.

In sum, the complex, large-scale dynamics of environmental conflicts make them difficult to analyze and resolve. They are particularly complex because they simultaneously involve multiple kinds of conflicts, including conflicts of interests and conflicts of values (Thompson & Gonzalez, 1997). The next sections describe the processes by which environmental conflicts are justified, progress, and escalate and can lead to destructive outcomes.

### Moral Exclusion

The *scope of justice* is our psychological boundary for fairness. Norms, moral rules, and concerns about rights and fairness govern our conduct toward those inside our scope of justice (also called the *moral community*; Deutsch, 1985; Opotow, 1990). Our scope of justice is attuned to: Who and what counts? Who and what simply does not matter? The scope of justice emerges from three attitudes toward others: (1) believing that considerations of fairness apply to them, (2) willingness to allocate a share of community resources to them, and (3) willingness to make sacrifices to foster their well-being (Opotow, 1987, 1993). As Table 1 illustrates, these attitudes are consistent with environmentalism because they place the well being of the larger ecosystem above anthropocentric or personal concerns (cf., Merchant, 1980; Stern & Dietz, 1994), emphasize the interdependence of people and nature, view humans as only one of many parts of nature, and advocate decision making that considers the larger natural system in which humans are embedded. This perspective is evident in the Gaia hypothesis and its depiction of Earth as a single, interconnected system (Lovelock, 1979). It is also evident in philosophies that characterize inanimate natural objects, such as soil, land, rivers, and mountains, as part of the biotic community and therefore of concern when considering public policy (Leopold, 1949; Stone, 1974).

Moral concerns are relevant for those inside the scope of justice. *Moral exclusion*, in contrast, rationalizes and justifies harm for those outside, viewing them as expendable, undeserving, exploitable, or irrelevant. An exclusionary, anti-environmentalist perspective, exemplified by the "wise use" movement, asserts the preeminence of humans and values human economic and recreational activity over the well-being of the nonhuman natural environment.

**Table 1.** Moral Exclusion in Environmental Conflict

<i>Inclusion in the scope of justice</i>	
Believing that considerations of fairness apply to the other	<i>Environmentalism</i> Considering the natural world as well as personal or human well-being
Willingness to allocate a share of community resources to the other	Viewing nonhuman aspects of the natural world as an end rather than only as a means and entitled to resources
Willingness to make sacrifices to foster the other's well-being	Willingness to assume costs of environmental protection at the individual, group, community, or national level
<i>Exclusion from the scope of justice</i>	
Believing that considerations of fairness do not apply to the other	<i>Antienvironmentalism</i> Considering personal or human concerns as more important than the natural world
Unwillingness to allocate community resources to others	Viewing nonhuman aspects of the natural world as a means rather than as an end and therefore not entitled to resources
Unwillingness to make sacrifices to foster others' well-being	Unwillingness to assume costs of environmental protection

In environmental conflict, moral exclusion can be flagrant, but it can also be subtle and difficult to detect, for example when some stakeholders are not invited to such decision-making meetings as the drafting of regulations. Because moral exclusion can be invisible when shared social convention supports it, it can be difficult to detect in our own thinking and within our own culture as well. However, moral exclusion has characteristic symptoms that offer evidence of its presence (Opatow, 1990). Recognizing these symptoms can alert us to the presence of moral exclusion and kindle awareness of destructive conflict processes it can foment. An analysis of the symptoms of moral exclusion in air, land, and water conflicts indicates that these symptoms can be grouped into three kinds of denial that can expedite exclusionary perceptions, beliefs, and behavior (Opatow, Weiss, Lemler, & Brown, 1997).

### A Typology of Denial in Environmental Conflict

*Denial* is “a defense mechanism consisting of an unconscious, selective blindness that protects a person from facing intolerable deeds and situations” (Corsini, 1999, p. 263). Denial is a form of selective inattention toward threat-provoking aspects of a situation to protect a person from anxiety, guilt, or other ego threats. Denial is a common and normal way of coping with problems and conflicts. Although it can promote healthy functioning, denial can also block attention to potential dangers to well-being. Psychoanalytical theories of denial focus on the individual and interpersonal relations. Although other disciplines also consider denial and self-deception, their focus includes the role of denial in social convention and at larger, societal levels of analysis (Weiss, 1997).

Evolutionary biologists view self-deception as wired into human makeup because of its adaptive value. Krebs, Denton, and Higgins (1988) propose that in our divided consciousness, in which the two brain hemispheres mediate contradictory behaviors, the left may “misinterpret and distort the knowledge possessed by the right” (p. 109). Positive effects of denial are evident in the *placebo effect*, “false beliefs about the connection between behaviors and consequences” (p. 129), associated with positive mental states and better healing after surgery or disease. The placebo effect is a form of denial that is adaptive because it stimulates motivation for persevering in the face of adversity.

Consistent with psychoanalytic theory, moral philosophers note that people tend to commit to well-supported ideas and avoid those that are painful. Denial arises when one deliberately maneuvers to avoid (1) accepting a new belief, (2) the pain of resisting a well-established belief, and (3) the pain involved in the belief that one is self-deceiving. They hypothesize that on some level self-deceivers know that they are self-deceiving. Thus, denial is the dialectical interplay of knowledge and will (Mullen, 1995).

Social theory views denial on a large scale as “the emergence of social amnesia, which makes and remakes society” (Jacoby, 1975, p. 4). Social amnesia allows people, individually and collectively, to cope with pain and tragedy, making it more concrete and palatable, even assigning it social value through any number of routes (e.g., reification and commodification). Social amnesia allows us to transform others from what they are to what we want them to be. This allows us to deal with, consume, or exterminate them, particularly when they pose a threat to oneself (Weiss, 1997).

As we will describe, denial not only has important functions in personal and social conflict but also in environmental conflict. Although the literature on environmental conflict has not heretofore examined its role, an understanding of denial in such conflicts is clearly critical. The next sections describe three forms of denial as interconnected “working parts” of moral exclusion, fostering exclusionary perceptions about the situation, the other, and oneself. Consequently, they justify behavior that influences the course and outcome of environmental conflicts.

### *Denial of Outcome Severity*

Denial of outcome severity conceals environmental harms that accrue to oneself, others, and the nonhuman natural environment. As Table 2 indicates, denial of outcome severity is evident in such symptoms of moral exclusion as minimizing injurious outcomes resulting from environmental practices and policies, invoking different levels of environmental harm as acceptable for different social categories, asserting that exposure to or injury from harms is an isolated event rather than ongoing, and disavowing deteriorations in physical conditions. Denial of outcome severity depends on selective distortions of harms and data.

**Table 2.** Symptoms of Moral Exclusion

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<i>Denial of outcome severity</i>	
Double standards	Invoking different levels of harms (e.g., pollution) as acceptable for different social groups
Concealing effects of harmful outcomes	Disregarding, ignoring, distorting, or minimizing injurious outcomes resulting from environmental practices
Temporal containment of harm	Asserting that exposure to or injury from harms is an isolated, unlikely event rather than routine and/or chronic
Reducing moral standards	Asserting that one's harmful behavior is proper while denying concerns for others
Utilizing euphemisms	Masking and sanitizing harmful outcomes with palliative terms, especially to disavow a deterioration in environmental conditions
<i>Denial of stakeholder inclusion</i>	
Biased evaluation of groups	Making unflattering between-group comparisons that bolster one's own ideological position or sense of superiority at the expense of others; emphasizing negative attributes of others while emphasizing positive attributes of oneself to discredit, exclude, and trivialize "outsiders'" interests, knowledge, or stake in a conflict compared with one's own
Condescension and derogation	Regarding other stakeholders with disdain and denigrating them
Dehumanization	Denying other stakeholders' entitlements to resources as well as denying their humanity and dignity
Fear of contamination	Perceiving contact or alliances with other stakeholders as posing a threat to one's position, credibility, or well-being, while denying the benefits that within-group diversity can offer
Normalization and glorification of violence	Glorifying and normalizing violence; viewing violence as an effective, legitimate, or even sublime form of human behavior while denying the potential of violence to damage people, the environment, relationships, and constructive conflict resolution processes
<i>Denial of self-involvement</i>	
Victim blaming	Displacing blame on those harmed
Deindividuation	Believing one's contribution to an environmental problem is undetectable
Diffusing responsibility	Denying personal responsibility for an environmental harm by seeing it as the result of collective rather than individual decisions and actions
Displacing responsibility	Identifying others, such as higher authorities, as legitimate decision makers responsible for environmental harms
Self-righteous comparisons	Casting oneself as environmentally "clean" and blameless in comparison to "dirty," irresponsible, or reprehensible others

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*Disbenefits.* Degree of harm and degradation, often called *disbenefits* in the air regulatory field, are a central issue debated in environmental conflicts. Disbenefits include harms accruing to people and nonhuman environmental entities over time, including damage to air, water, or land commons at every level of analysis: individual, community, region, and so on. Because stringent environmental standards mandated by law do not necessarily promote stringent standards of compliance or enforcement, disbenefits are often debated phenomenologically, as regulatory issues, or as differential outcomes to particular groups.

Conflicts concern disbenefits, for example, when they focus on extent or severity of smog. Denial of disbenefits was apparent during negotiations of the Ozone Transport Assessment Group (OTAG). OTAG, comprised of 37 states, convened for 2 years (1995–1997) to identify a control strategy to reduce transported ozone across the eastern United States from upwind to downwind states (Weiss, 1996). During that process, several upwind states denied the well-documented nature of regional ozone transport and posited that only areas with an already-identified ozone problem should be required to control their emissions. As one representative of an upwind state stated:

I am not so sure that we need long-range ozone-transport control because we are not seeing the ozone and its precursors transported over long distances, such as the Mississippi River to the East Coast. . . . If we are going to control ozone, it should probably be on a smaller scale. (“OTAG result: Severe Nox emissions cut,” 1996, p. 8)

This position implies that the dirtiest power plants, many located in rural Midwestern areas that do not yet have high pollution levels, should be excused from controls. These stakeholders denied not only outcome severity but also the benefits of controls for local populations in the immediate vicinity of these power plants.

Because the disbenefit argument can bolster any side of an environmental dispute, it is important to understand it in context. During the OTAG negotiations, some stakeholders who denied airshed pollution severity nevertheless used the disbenefits argument to justify their unwillingness to control their own emissions. They presented evidence indicating that certain emission controls that would provide significant regional benefit would yield local disbenefits. Thus, an emphasis on localized disbenefits can sidestep an analysis of the larger picture and the relative, net benefits on a regional level. In this case, further review of the evidence offered revealed that disbenefits were very localized and for the most part at levels so low that they would rarely trigger violations of the air standard.

*Advocacy science.* As the previous example illustrates, environmental data play a key role in assessing and asserting outcome severity. Science is a tool, and how that tool is used depends on who is wielding it. Although science is universally acknowledged as an appropriate basis for making environmental policy, science is not monolithic and few facts are indisputable. Because facts are filtered by values (Stern & Dietz, 1994), there is a tension between the objective and subjective in science.

Decisions about the focus and methods of scientific investigation, kinds of data collected, kinds of analyses employed, interpretations of the data, and predictive reliability of those data are subject to interpretation and debate. As a result, scientific methods and findings often fuel rather than resolve environmental controversy. Proponents of a particular course of action can selectively use scientific findings to support their own beliefs and goals while denying the importance of underlying values and interests shaping their interpretation of scientific findings. During OTAG negotiations, computer modeling of smog had been initially scorned by some industry groups. Over time they embraced these models once they learned how to use the model and its results to their advantage.

Science can also be used as a tactic to block change or gain strategic advantage. Stating “we need more time to study the problem” not only utilizes science as a stumbling block but implicitly denies that harm can accrue from inaction. Finally, data are central to environmental conflict when some stakeholders challenge the assumptions of predictive data as inadequate or erroneous. When the data are overtly disputed, trust, communication, and commonality of goals are implicitly debated as well.

#### *Denial of Stakeholder Inclusion*

Although environmental conflicts ostensibly concern physical resources, much energy and acrimony questions the legitimacy of particular stakeholders. The participation of some stakeholders is mandated by regulatory bodies, whereas other stakeholders self-identify as legitimate because of their concerns. The legitimacy, reasonableness, and urgency of their concerns, however, often spark between- and within-group conflict. As Table 2 indicates, denial of stakeholder inclusion is evident in such symptoms of moral exclusion as unflattering between-group comparisons that bolster one’s own ideological position or sense of superiority at the expense of other stakeholders; biased evaluations ignoring positive attributes of other stakeholders while ignoring negative attributes of oneself; trivializing other stakeholders’ interests, knowledge, or stake in an issue when compared with one’s own; regarding other stakeholders with disdain and disparaging or denigrating them; denying the entitlements of other stakeholders to resources, as well as denying their humanity and dignity; perceiving contact or alliances with other stakeholders as posing a threat to one’s position, credibility, or well-being, while denying benefits that within-group diversity can offer; and glorifying and normalizing violence. These symptoms are conspicuous when labeling others as “outsiders” or “extremists.”

*Outsiders.* In environmental disputes, parties often denigrate and label each other. Labeling can cast the other as an “outsider” with an identity fitting the labeler’s agenda. In air quality disputes, regulators are seen by automobile

manufacturers as “ecofreaks” who want to stop the driving public by adopting standards-forcing technology to introduce zero-emitting vehicles into the market. The same regulators are labeled “pinheaded bureaucrats” by citizens from another perspective who fear pollution and are unsatisfied with reasons given for siting a power plant in their community. Automobile manufacturers and oil companies are perceived by environmentalists as “foot-dragging big businesses” trying to make a buck while resisting the development and production of low-emission vehicles and legislation mandating cleaner fuels.

*Extremists.* Categorizing other stakeholders as “extreme” because of their lifestyle, ideology, or conflict resolution tactics marginalizes their concerns and potential to contribute constructively to the environmental dispute. Environmental conflicts are typically multiparty disputes yielding allies that cross traditional political boundaries. Unlikely and unstable coalitions can form that include a range of stakeholders from conservative to radical positions. Moderate stakeholders can fear extremists on their own side, seeing them as hindering public support, distracting from more important issues, and making compromise inordinately difficult. Moderates therefore justify excluding stakeholders with more extreme positions as an expedient facilitating conflict resolution. Moderates on opposite sides of an environmental conflict may share more beliefs and expectancies about the dispute resolution process than they share with extremists on their own side.

Including or excluding particular stakeholders changes the coalition strength supporting or opposing particular positions. The ideological mix of stakeholders on a particular side of a conflict can indeed influence public and political support as well as determine the kinds of trade-offs that may acceptably resolve a conflict. Therefore, stakeholder exclusion and inclusion influences the nature, course, and outcome of environmental conflicts.

Although within-group exclusion of “extremists” may be pragmatic, it risks losing the most distilled and thorny aspects of an environmental conflict. So-called extremists may hold the key to durable resolution because they raise issues that won’t go away. Denying the concerns of extremists risks forging an easier, faster, but less enduring agreement unleavened by diversity of perspectives. In the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s environmental regulatory negotiations (“reg-negs”), it is often difficult for some stakeholders to procure a seat at the table. As a consequence, many of those negotiated settlements have disappointed environmentalists, industry, and state regulators. Thus, denial of the legitimacy or relevance of extremists’ concerns may work, but only in the short run. In the long run, extremists’ commitment, persistence, principle-based positions, willingness to sacrifice, and access to media attention can ultimately change public opinion.

Stakeholders labeled extremists and excluded from mainstream dispute resolution forums may utilize warfare-like tactics to achieve ends they deem important. Because of the attention that dramatic actions can garner, they can achieve public

recognition, engage the public in environmental issues attitudinally and behaviorally, and ultimately, influence the conflict process. Environmental groups once considered extreme, such as Greenpeace and Earthfirst!, continue to gain mainstream acceptance by successfully challenging the acceptability of current practice. The Public Interest Research Group's (PIRG's) campaign to identify and shut down old power plants across the nation, at one time a radical idea, received significant political support from Democratic and Republican gubernatorial candidates in recent elections.

Although extreme positions are not inevitably connected with violence, those who self-identify as extremist or approve of extreme methods for achieving their goals may normalize or glorify violence. As a result of repeated exposure, violence can increasingly seem effective, legitimate, normal, and even a sublime form of human expression. This denies the potential of violence to damage relationships, people, the environment, and the constructiveness of the conflict resolution process. Although within-group ideological diversity that includes extremists can be difficult and distasteful, slow progress, and seem inefficient in the short run, in the long run its inclusiveness can promote environmentalism by forging creative, integrative, far-reaching, and durable solutions to environmental conflicts.

#### *Denial of Self-Involvement*

Although we tend to think of moral exclusion as excluding others, moral exclusion involves self-exclusion as well. *Involvement* means willingness to take action, to allocate resources, to be concerned about others, and to make sacrifices that ameliorate an environmental problem. It is therefore consistent with moral inclusion and environmentalism. As Table 2 indicates, denial of self-involvement is evident in such symptoms of moral exclusion as displacing blame for harms on those harmed; believing that one's contribution to an environmental problem is undetectable; denying personal responsibility for environmental harm by seeing it as the result of collective rather than individual decisions and actions; and casting oneself as a clean and blameless outsider in comparison to dirty, irresponsible, reprehensible stakeholders. Denial of self-involvement takes two forms: self-exclusion and reluctant participation.

*Self-exclusion.* Denial of self-involvement minimizes the extent to which an environmental dispute is relevant to oneself or one's group. Individuals, groups, or polities seen as stakeholders to the conflict by some may hope to exclude themselves as affected by the problem or hope to exclude an environmental issue from the scope of their concerns in order to protect their self-interest. By casting themselves as "clean" and insignificant contributors to pollution, they assert their nonrelevance to environmental controversy. This is exemplified in individuals who do not see their part in contributing to air pollution when they drive alone to work each day or purchase sport utility vehicles emitting high levels of emissions.

We also self-exclude to protect our sense of well-being. Although we would like to see ourselves as safe, protected, and able to assess our vulnerability to environmental harm with some certainty, this is not realistic. Environmental conditions depend on natural and human systems and are subject to rapid, unpredictable change. Environmental conditions also result from long-term, cumulative harms that take years, decades, or longer to surface (Susskind & Cruikshank, 1987). Therefore, identifying who is likely to be affected by air, water, or soil pollution, including ourselves, is not always possible.

*Reluctant participation.* Some stakeholders reluctantly participate in environmental conflict as negotiators but they do so for pragmatic reasons: to comply with federal mandates, to protect the interests of their region, or to prevent the adoption of an agreement they or their constituency would find onerous. More engaged stakeholders, such as downwind states affected by transported air pollution from upwind states, view the reluctant participation self-proclaimed outsiders as denial. During ozone transport negotiations, some states sought to exclude themselves from having to implement controls by denying that they were contributing to the ozone transport problem. Instead they blamed downwind states: "Utilities in non-attainment areas facing draconian controls are looking for the strictest possible ozone controls on the rest of the OTAG region to help ease their attainment burden. But utilities in attainment areas are resisting this" ("Ozone transport region utilities," 1996, p. 7). Other states that were unwilling to assume responsibility and engage in action claimed special privileges and denied their regions' contribution to pollution.

Another route to denial of self-involvement recognizes a problem as real but focuses on parts of the problem that exonerate oneself and therefore denies one's contribution to the problem. Although an upwind region may agree that interstate ozone transport poses public health concerns, it may identify the source of the problem as another region rather than acknowledge its own contribution. When Governor George Voinovich of Ohio stated that "the Northeast creates 75 percent of the problem it is now pointing to the Midwest to solve . . . Ohio contributes less than 5 percent of the smog problem in the Northeast" (Voinovich, 1997, p. A19), he acknowledged the issue but denied Ohio's contribution to it, locating the predominant source of smog in downwind states.

In sum, denial resolves the inherent complexity and ambiguity of environmental conflict by simplifying facts and issues and by replacing uncertainty and the unknown with dogma. In so doing it blunts the challenge and impetus for social change inherent in these conflicts. As a result, trust, communication, cooperation, and constructive conflict resolution are casualties of the conflict.

### Conclusion

Environmental controversies are complex, multiparty disputes. Although the physical facts, stakeholders, and their interests differ considerably from conflict to

conflict, the processes that underlie environmental conflicts have striking similarities. Fundamental justice beliefs, underlying moral issues, and denial shape the course of environmental conflicts and influence the analysis of “facts” in the controversy, the allocation of blame, the assessment of one’s own contributions to the issue, and the evaluation of trade-offs that can resolve the conflict. The metaphor of cancer is apt (cf. Sontag, 1978). Denial is undetectable at very early stages, but as it gains energy, its spread is insidious and it actively attacks its host. Although denial and moral exclusion are more obvious in escalated conflict, it is particularly important to recognize denial and moral exclusion in chronic, nonescalated conflicts. These are the conflicts that are most common and most amenable to conflict resolution.

Conflict escalation is itself a form of denial; salient issues are lost as conflicts shift in focus and spiral outward. Conflict volatility and expansion are dramatic and can distract from—and be preferable to—addressing deeper issues in a conflict, such as the seemingly insoluble, volatile identity issues embedded in protracted intergroup conflicts (cf. Rouhana, 1997). Ironically, the intensification of environmental conflict and degradation can be positive when it makes denial of outcome severity, stakeholder exclusion, and self-involvement more difficult. As a consequence of conflict intensification, negative environmental and human effects are increasingly obvious, the urgency of finding long-term solutions increases, and public support for scrutiny and regulation of previously acceptable practices increases. Thus, environmental disbenefits have the potential to activate the individual and collective concerns that can increase the scope of justice.

### *Implications for Theory*

Utilizing environmental conflicts as a vehicle, this article has identified three kinds of denial in environmental conflict. Whereas previous research has addressed the antecedents (Opatow, 1987, 1993) and consequences (Opatow, 1994) of moral exclusion, this article has focused on its process. The three kinds of denial we have identified conceptually differentiate among the symptoms of moral exclusion and bring some order to conflict processes as they unfold in real time. Our analysis suggests that denial is not merely reactive and the result of conflict but is instead powerfully proactive. The three kinds of denial we identify function as interdependent gears that drive the process of moral exclusion. They do so by aggressively changing perceptions, motivations, morals, and behavior, facilitating the tunnel vision that minimizes complexity of the issues, facts, and parties.

### *Implications for Practice*

Given that denial is part of environmental conflict, how can the process be managed constructively? Ozawa and Susskind (1995) identify three techniques that lend themselves well to constructive management of environmental conflicts:

information sharing, joint fact finding, and collaborative model building. Employing these techniques can bring policymakers and other stakeholders to the table as direct participants with scientists, resulting in more grounded decision making and enhancing communication, perspective taking, and credibility.

Our analysis suggests that the focus should also be on identifying and managing denial, maintaining the integrity of a conflict resolution process, and fostering constructive process and outcome. A constructive conflict resolution process includes the following elements:

- *Transparent processes*: Are they open to inspection and negotiation?
- *Interdependencies*: Are they understood and valued?
- *Perspective taking*: Is it occurring early and often?
- *Inclusion and access*: Are stakeholders' concerns and perspectives at table?
- *Looking ahead*: Are the changes that can occur over time being considered?

Although denial thwarts solutions to environmental problems, collective involvement and the inclusion of diverse stakeholders facilitates communication, perceptions of interdependence, trust, and collective problem solving, offering processes conducive to lasting and constructive solutions. Perspective taking is crucial. Like lungs breathing in and out, perspective taking is a shifting from background to foreground. Without a rhythm and regularity to this shift, much is lost.

A final form of denial bears mention. Seeing the environment as "out there" or as "other" instead of within ourselves exhibits exclusion and denial. The natural world is internal. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the elements from which our bodies are constituted and continuously remade. Seeing the environment as separate from oneself creates a false distinction coloring our sense of the interdependencies between self and environment.

We close with three simple tenets. Keeping them in mind can thwart the tendency for denial and moral exclusion in environmental conflict. First, we are all victims in that we are recipients of pollution generated by others. Second, we are all violators in that we create pollution that has an impact on others. Third, we all need to work at ongoing, constructive problem solving and dialogue. Acting on these tenets takes persistence but it can minimize environmental damage and foster environmental benefits for all.

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