


Minority social influence against socio-environmental crisis: Intentional ecological communities in rural places

Influencia social minoritaria frente a la crisis socioambiental: Comunidades intencionales ecológicas en espacios rurales

Rodolfo E. Mardones 

Instituto de Estudios Psicológicos, Universidad Austral de Chile, Valdivia, Chile (rodolfo.mardones@uach.cl)

Received: June 30, 2022

Accepted: October 26, 2022

Published: November 15, 2022

Recommended citation: Mardones, R. (2022). Influencia social minoritaria frente a la crisis socioambiental: Comunidades intencionales ecológicas en espacios rurales. *Psicoperspectivas*, 21(3). <https://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol21-issue3-fulltext-2724>

Background

Recent years have shown that we are experiencing an unprecedented socio-environmental crisis. The main argument is that we are facing changes in the planet's climate, which are expressed in a variation of precipitation and temperature. In this context, the human dimension is a relevant element to assess how beliefs, values and practices influence people's behavior in the face of climate change. In previous studies, psychology has been interested in the environment from notions such as perception, pro-environmental behavior, or other individual psychological dimensions. In recent years, greater attention has been paid to psychosocial and community dynamics, although those focused on the urban individual predominate. In this context, the emergence of Intentional Ecological Communities (CEIs) is identified as a new social actor. The CEIs act at the interface of personal and collective change, meet under ecological principles and experiment forms of coexistence in the face of the socio-environmental crisis, to influence society and its relationship with nature. They conduct daily experiments and emphasize the relevance of their practices. These are constituted in operations of discourse and materiality to order and arrange the action. Based on the above, the agency of the CEIs is relevant because it allows us to identify the practices to act on a daily basis in the face of the socio-environmental crisis and to highlight its contradictions.

Aims

To understand the practices of minority influence, that Intentional Ecological Communities located in Chile, direct to their surrounding community.

Method & procedures

We conducted a qualitative study. We worked with a multi-case design to map the diversity of intentional ecological communities at a national scale. We conducted an ethnographic approach and visited communities located in rural areas or at the urban-rural interface, between 2019 and 2020. The participants were the permanent inhabitants of six CEIs located in Chile. Communities were purposively selected based on the criteria: operation for at least 10 years; concern for the socio-environmental crisis; and voluntary participation. We conducted a review of public documents, visits and daily conversations with community members, visitors, and neighbors. Subsequently, we conducted observational participation in daily activities and in-depth interviews, guided by a thematic guideline. We analyzed the data produced in the field experience by means of a descriptive analysis, while the interviews were analyzed by means of a thematic content analysis.

Results & discussion

The CEIs define themselves as spaces for learning, collaboration, and testing of diverse practices for the benefit of people, the community, and the planet. They criticize society's inaction, because it ignores that the conservation of life on the planet is an urgent problem. Amid contradictions, the CEIs develop and sustain a coherent point of view that is oriented towards a rethinking of the relationship between people and nature. The communities are located

in rural areas, but most of them are made up of people from urban centers. Therefore, they involve internal migration processes to realize a communitarian utopia in favor of the planet. The material conditions that sustain the utopia are varied, since they have different modalities of land tenure and use, with private property predominating. CIEs carry out their practices for two purposes: for their own subsistence as a community and to intentionally influence society and the community around them. Minority social influence occurs under certain conditions of stability and coherence. In the case of the CIEs, a stable and coherent point of view is evident, which translates into environmental, social, and economic practices of unstable duration. In contrast to the theory of minority social influence, which in its most classic version resorts to immediate interindividual relationships, we observe that the CIEs studied are constituted as such in a longer historical process. Therefore, they are not limited to the number of participants, but to their peripheral position, in terms of the responses that, at a given historical moment, are dominant with respect to a social order that exploits nature. In the CIEs attempt to influence the surrounding community, we observe important contradictions that show a tension between the characteristics of each community and the translation of their convictions into daily practices. Refers to the degree of opposition of the CIEs to the dominant economic, ecological and/or social norm. And, above all, the community's sensitivity to relate to the discourse of green and environmental consciousness, which has been used above all to actualize the capitalist dynamics of exploitation of nature.

Conclusion

In summary, we note that the socio-environmental crisis and its immediate expression in climate change are taking center stage as a catastrophe that must be addressed urgently. The CIEs, from their inhabited spaces in rural areas, try out other forms of coexistence and carry out different practices in a coherent manner, in the face of a majority that does not mobilize around the planet. However, in their attempt to achieve socio-environmental change, they are involved in a daily life full of contradictions and socio-political agency. In this situation, the majority does not always adopt a negative position and the minority does not always propose an ideal alternative to the crisis. In this sense, it is a challenge for psychology to consider that both active minorities and the transformative force of collective behavior can drive environmental justice and propose strategies to address the effects of the socio-environmental crisis.

Keywords: community, climate change, minority social influence, socio-environmental crisis

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Financial support: Universidad Austral de Chile, Project DID S-2018-15.

Conflict of interests: The author declares to have no conflict of interests.



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