

“Revise and resubmit” response letter, second of two. Citation for final article: Perkins, Tracy. 2012. “Women’s Pathways Into Activism: Rethinking the Women’s Environmental Justice Narrative in California’s San Joaquin Valley.” *Organization & Environment*, 25(1):76-94.



Because there are so few environmental justice leaders in the region under study, I believe that the 25 women I interviewed are in fact representative of all women environmental justice leaders in the region. I have edited the methods section to make this clear by adding the following text:

I stopped trying to find new people to interview when continued snowball sampling repeatedly provided only the names of women leaders I had already interviewed or planned to interview. This led me to believe that my interview pool was a reasonably complete representation of the entire population of women perceived by their peers to be environmental justice leaders in the region at that time. (p. 12)

I also realized that my use of the word “sample” to describe the women I interviewed confused my meaning, and I have replaced it with words like “interviewees” in the text.

I have also edited the text to respond to the reviewer’s concern that using terms like “challenge” oversteps the limits of my data. For example, I changed this text:

My data **challenges** the idea that environmental justice activism is the first political activity for most women environmental justice activists, and that they are motivated to become activists primarily in order to protect the health of their families. (abstract)

to this text:

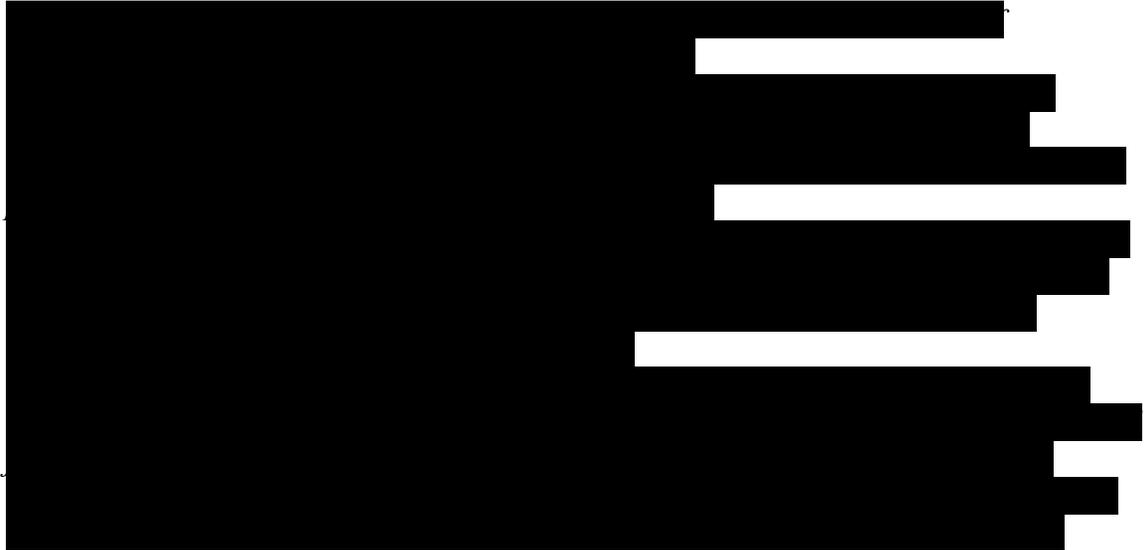
My data **complicates** the idea that environmental justice activism is the first political activity for most women environmental justice activists, and that they are motivated to become activists primarily in order to protect the health of their families. (abstract)

I feel that the existing text in the “future research” section of the paper sufficiently addresses the question of whether or not my findings are representative of other social/geographic contexts and have made no further changes:

More empirical research is needed to determine how applicable my findings from the San Joaquin Valley are to other parts of the country. The Valley’s history as the birthplace of the farmworkers’ movement could mean that women environmental justice activists there have more prior political experience than women in other areas of the country. Comparative research in other regions should shed light on geographic variations in activist history and the extent to

which they currently shape women’s entry into environmental justice activism. (p. 29-30)

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I have edited my text to respond to the reviewer’s concern. For the examples s/he cites above, I made the following changes:

Many scholars **find** that women become environmental justice activists according to a common set of experiences in which apolitical women personally experience an environmental problem that launches them into a life activism in order to protect the health of their families. (abstract)

Prior scholarly work on women’s participation in environmental justice activism

often **supports** the following narrative: apolitical women personally experience a specific environmental problem and are motivated to become activists in order to protect the health of their families. (p. 2)

First, many scholars write about women environmental justice activists who have no prior political experience... Second, scholars also **write** that environmental justice advocates personally experience the environmental harms that they seek to remedy... Third, scholars **describe** the role of a mother who protects her children and home as an important incentive for environmental justice activism... (p. 3-4)

I in no way wish to imply that prior scholars knowingly misrepresented their data. However, I do wish to raise reasonable questions about the possibility that the methods some of them describe using to collect their data could have unknowingly obscured some important themes. As the reviewer notes, I have no way to assert whether this was or was not in fact the case. However, as I write in the article, I believe this is a reasonable question to raise based on the following

- The work of the other scholars shows that people sometimes represent themselves differently in public than they do in private. Scholars also show that women are particularly likely to recreate traditionally gendered narratives in their public depictions of themselves
- Many prior environmental justice scholars describe incorporating women’s public narratives as part of their data but in their written findings don’t account for the possibility that some of these public presentations of self may vary from women’s private representations and/or be politically motivated in ways that obscure the truth.

This is an important omission. It does not mean that prior scholarship *was* impacted by this possibility, only that it *could* have been. Raising this possibility in my paper is an appropriate line of questioning. This line of questioning makes up a small portion of the paper, and is accompanied by several other alternative ideas for explaining the discrepancy between my findings and that of much other scholarship.

I also do not believe that my analysis silences the voices of the women quoted by other scholars. Like prior scholars, I also include direct quotes in my paper. The experiences of the women I interviewed also deserve to be heard even if they contradict what other women have said to other scholars. Also, quotes in academic papers are selected by the author(s). The extent to which they represent truth is mediated by how representative they are of the larger group being analyzed, as well as how representative they are of that woman’s own reality.

Feminist social scientists share a commitment that women research subjects can speak for themselves and as such they often emphasize interview data in their methods. However, critical feminists scholars are also careful to point out that interview data does not unproblematically reflect reality because it is mediated through the interviewer and his or her own standpoint. Interview data is limited by the questions the people interviewed, the setting and purpose of the interview, the questions the interviewer asks or does not ask, the excerpts that the scholar chooses to analyze more closely and/or

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include in written findings, and the interpretation of the interviewee’s own words by the scholar (Sprague, 2005). It is important for scholars to ask these questions about our research methods to make sure our scholarship becomes more nuanced and accurate over time. The peer-review process does not exempt scholarship from further critique.

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It is true that many of the articles I cite do not take as their primary task the question of what leads women into environmental justice activism. However, these studies still make claims relevant to my research. Sometimes I cite claims they make that are supported by their own empirical evidence, and sometimes I cite claims they make for which it is unclear what evidence they are drawing on. Whether or not the claim that I am citing within their work is their primary argument or is rather a claim nestled within a different or larger argument, these claims together contribute to a narrative that describes women’s entry into environmental justice activism along the lines I describe in my paper. I have added the last sentence of the paragraph below to clarify this to my readers:

Environmental justice scholars most often report women’s experiences as variations on a common theme: women without political experience personally experience an environmental problem and are motivated to become activists in order to protect their families and communities. Some scholars place these experiences at the center of their work, while others assert them in passing in scholarship devoted to other topics. (p. 3)

I have also changed this text:

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Environmental justice scholars can benefit from better analyzing a broader array of factors that lead people into activism.

To this text:

Environmental justice scholars can benefit from analyzing a broad array of factors that lead people into activism. (p. 8)

I respond to the reviewer’s specific examples below.

Peeples and DeLuca, 2006

The reviewer accurately points out that the main argument within the Peeples and DeLuca article is that “

.” However, Peeples and DeLuca also make other claims in their article that are relevant to my research:

- “This movement’s inception marks the emergence of environmental populism and what journalist Mark Dowie describes as a ‘new class of activist – the angry mother’ (127). This new political actor has transformed the political scene by...” (p. 59).
- “Today, the community activists use what appears to be a liability, their gender – especially their roles as mothers and housewives – as potent rhetorical resources to enlist others in the fight against practices that threaten their homes, families and communities. The rhetorical situation they face requires the activists to use these resources to rhetorically construct the “truth” of the matter, one not necessarily based on scientific fact (though statistics supporting the cause are always welcome), but one based on personal experiences as mothers through knowledge gained from the community and their bodies” (p. 61-62).

These quotes show that while the Peeples and DeLuca article is primarily about communicative strategies, their work rests on an underlying assumption/argument that the women activists described don’t only *represent* themselves as mothers and housewives, but actually *are* mothers and housewives. The text does not address the possibility that this rhetorical strategy could lead to an over-representation of motherhood narratives when using public speech to assess the actual experiences of women.

Krauss, 1993b

I cite this paper by Krauss as scholarship that supports all three components of the traditional women’s environmental justice narrative because as part of a paper on “the ways in which [women’s] traditional role as mothers becomes a resource for their resistance,” (abstract) she also asserts the following:

- “Spurred by the threat that toxic wastes pose to family health and community survival, grass-roots women activists have assumed the leadership of community environmental struggles” (p. 237).
- “Unlike the more abstract, issue-oriented focus of national groups, women’s focus

- is on environmental issues that grow out of their concrete, immediate experiences” (p. 248).
- By and large, it is women, in their traditional role as mothers, who make the link between toxic-related hazards and their children’s ill health. They discover toxic-related hazards: multiple miscarriages, birth defects, cancer deaths and so on. This is not surprising, as the gender-based division of labor in a capitalist society gives working-class women the responsibility for the health of their children.” (p. 252).
 - It is the traditional, “private” women’s concerns about home, children and family that provide the initial impetus for blue collar women’s involvement in issues of toxic waste.” P. 253

Bell and Braun, 2010

I cite the Bell and Braun article as scholarship that supports the aspect of the traditional women’s environmental justice narrative through the “role of a mother who protects her children and home as an important incentive for environmental justice activism” because of the following content:

- “The most prevalent theme, and most deeply expressed conviction, among women activists in our sample is that their activism is an extension of their identity-and obligation – as mothers... One example of this pattern is West Virginia activist Maria Gunnoe, whose narrative of entry into the EJ movement reflects her motivations for action as stemming from her role as a mother and her anger at that role being compromised” (p. 803).

Brown and Ferguson (1995) provide another example. Their article is “an attempt to understand how women activists transcend private pain, fear, and disempowerment and become powerful forces for change by organizing against toxic waste in their communities... The authors are particularly interested in the transformation of self of these women, with an emphasis on “ways of knowing.” They also examine the potential of existing social movement theories to explain women’s activism against toxic waste.” (abstract). I cite their article as supporting all three elements of the traditional women’s environmental justice narrative because they also assert the following:

- “Most of these women are housewives, typically from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds, and most had never been political activists until they discovered the threat of toxic contamination in their communities” (p. 146).
- “Women activists have a different approach to experience and knowledge. We view their different, gendered experience as based on their roles as people who center their worldview more on relationships than on abstract rights and on their roles as the primary caretakers of the family” (p. 147).
- “In each case study we have found, there are remarkable similarities in the women activists’ transformation from housewives to activists. Although there are differences in time, in region, in the particular circumstances of each woman’s life and the cause of the toxic waste nearby, overall there is a consistency of theme and of experience. Each woman who becomes a toxic waste activists first

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suspects that there may be a health problem in her neighborhood when her children become ill” (p. 148).

- “Case studies of women toxic waste activists support Sara Ruddick’s assertion that women’s work and perceptions tend to be rooted, at least initially, in the concrete and the everyday” (p. 149).
- “The traits and experiences of women who become toxic waste activists are not theirs simply because they are women who live in proximity to toxic waste hazards; rather, they conceptualize their action, both for themselves and a wider public, out of the meaning of womanhood, and especially of motherhood, in our culture” (p. 150).
- “The women activists transform their everyday experiences, most typically their own and their neighbors’ children’s illness, into knowledge that they can use in the struggle against toxic waste, and they insist on its validity as knowledge” (p. 151).

.....



I have made changes to my word choice throughout the text to respond to this critique. In response to the text above, I made the following change:

My data **complicates** the idea that environmental justice activism is the first political activity for most women environmental justice activists, and that they are motivated to become activists primarily in order to protect the health of their families. (abstract)

I am surprised to learn that my paper reads as an attack on prior scholarship. I hope the reviewer finds that my careful attention to language in this edit reduces this

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interpretation. I agree with the reviewer that it would be problematic to claim that prior scholarship is wrong based on the results of one small study. However, that is not what this article does. Instead, it uses the results of one small study to reflect on prior scholarship and ask important questions about it to help guide future research. I think this is entirely appropriate and helps the field move forward in constructive ways.

.....

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

On page 29, I pose the question of why my findings are so different than those of prior scholars. I then suggest several possibilities:

The differences between my findings and those of prior scholars who have addressed similar questions calls for more research to explain the discrepancy and to continue to build knowledge about women’s entry into environmental justice activism. I suggest several lines of inquiry to explore: 1) regional variation in activist history and its influence on women’s pathways into environmental justice activism, 2) changes in women’s pathways into environmental justice activism over time, and 3) the possibility that prior scholars overstated the traditional women’s environmental justice narrative. (p. 29)

The reviewer’s comments indicate that his/her preferred explanation for why my findings differ from those of prior scholars is the second one listed in my text. I think that this approach is at best a partial answer. My data clearly shows that some of the women I interviewed are very much like the women who have traditionally been of interest to environmental justice scholars: poor women of color working on local pollution problems. These women still have different pathways into EJ leadership than those described in prior scholarship. Being a poor woman of color working on local issues does not mean that one cannot still bring a background in political work to environmental justice advocacy, or be motivated by goals broader than the protection of one’s family, if indeed one has a family at all. I added the last sentence to the text below to emphasize this point:

My research therefore differs from previous scholarship both in the diversity of the class backgrounds of the activists interviewed, and in the results. This diversity among the women may account for some of the differences between my findings and those of other scholars, but certainly not all of it. Many of the women I interviewed fit the traditional expectations of an environmental justice activist in terms of their race, class and advocacy but their experiences still do not fit the traditional women’s environmental justice narrative. (p. 29)

Regardless, my study offers no definite to determine which of the three possibilities described above is the best explanation, so I present all three as explanations worthy of consideration in future research instead of privileging only one of them. Because I am not reframing the paper around the second possible explanation of my findings, I am also not providing more detailed historical background on the movement’s emergence.

Reference

Sprague, J. (2005). *Feminist methodologies for critical researchers: Bridging differences*.

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