

2021

Discovering Local Discourses about Climate Change

Giovanni Bennardo
Northern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea>

Recommended Citation

Bennardo, Giovanni. "Discovering Local Discourses about Climate Change." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2021): 51-53.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol23/iss1/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Global Warming in Local Discourses: How Communities around the World Make Sense of Climate Change

MICHAEL BRÜGGEMANN AND SIMONE RÖDDER,
EDS.

OPEN BOOK PUBLISHERS, CAMBRIDGE, UK, 2020
270 PP. £30.95 HARDCOVER; £20.95 PAPERBACK;
£5.95 EPUB

REVIEWED BY GIOVANNI BENNARDO

Climate change is one of the most challenging issues that we are collectively facing insofar as it threatens the survival of our species. It is without doubt that before long, extensive action, beyond those initiated over the past three decades, will have to be implemented worldwide to try to minimize its potential and disastrous effects. How much do people all over the world know about climate change? How and from which sources do they acquire knowledge about climate change? How do they modify their existing knowledge to incorporate the newly acquired one? These, and other related ones, are the main questions that the contributors to this book address. It is a daunting task, and they venture into it without holding back or feeling belittled by the size of the issue. They clearly delineate a path and follow it in such a way as to provide enlightening results and at the same time provide some initial answers to these questions.

In their introduction to the book, the two editors, Brüggemann and Rödder, make clear that the actual processes labeled ‘climate change’ need to be “distinguished from the patterns of interpretation related to these processes” and they continue by adding that “in this sense the concept of climate change is a social construction” (p. 3). More importantly, they state that these interpretations are those that will eventually “motivate people to change their lifestyles ... and ... mobilize political actions” (p. 3). This “sense-making process” occurs in the encounter between “transnational and local discourses” as well as “scientific and other ways of sense-making” (p. 3-4). In other words, the local communities affected by climate change construct explanations, i.e., “patterns of interpretation,” of its effects in a discursive process that integrates their experiences, e.g., extreme weather events, and “patterns of communication” that provide them information about climate change. Local discourses are the results of two processes named “localization of transnational climate discourses and climatization of local discourses” (p. 7) (*italics in original*). The first points to the resilience of local discourses over received new information, and the second to the inclusion of the new information received in local discourses.

In the following six chapters, the authors present results of their investigations conducted in communities around the globe: Eriksen in Greenland (Costa del Nuuk), Friedrich in the Philippines (Palawan), Hoppe et al. in Northern Germany (Hamburg and Otterndorf), de Wit in Tanzania (Maasai), Mahmud in Bangladesh (Satkhira), and Otto in a generalized scientific climate change research world. The first five scholars embed their work in extensive ethnographic field research characterized by a common focus on the sources of information about climate change and by the characteristics of the discourses used to talk about it, both locally and internationally. The methodologies

employed include the use of participant observation, different types of interviews (open-ended, focus group, and semi-structured focus group), surveys (some online), media diaries, and cognitive tasks (free listing and sorting tasks). Otto's chapter is an exception because as an insider, this author focuses on the scientific community discourses about climate change and how they have recently moved from explaining its anthropogenic causes to converging on the causal relationship between climate change and extreme weather events.

The two editors and the authors locate themselves at the intersection of several disciplines including anthropology (cultural and cognitive), communication/journalism, and sociology. The results that they present provide meaningful insights on local perspectives. These are embedded in the discourses about climate change by members of the communities. The authors consistently present concise and significant extracts of these discourses as short narratives. This technique makes the communities more real to the reader. This is because of the apparent empathy the authors feel for the individuals they investigated and the richness of their presentations.

While the major findings vary among the case studies, they also highlight several salient commonalities. Greenlanders' local perception of the positive effects of climate change color their narratives (pp. 69-70). Filipinos' traditional beliefs about the relationship between human-environment and human-weather resonate in the newly introduced information about climate change (p. 114). Northern Germans (p. 153) residing in a rural environment (Otterndorf) feel more personally threatened than do urban dwellers (Hamburg). Maasai contest the power of science because of its attempt to take the place of their God (p. 201). Bangladeshis' experiences of local geohazards filters the information they obtain from a number of sources, e.g., television, non-governmental organizations, and infor-

mal social contacts (p. 234). In all five communities, local experiences are privileged over media reports of events related to climate change. This highlights the extensive preservation of local knowledge, which is rarely abandoned and only sometimes partially modified.

As informative as these contributions are, I wonder whether they will have an impact on policy makers, which is a stated goal of the authors. The main reason for my doubt is rooted in the fundamental and at times exclusively qualitative approach—mostly thematic analyses, i.e., personal interpretations, of language data collected through interviews. Friedrich's methodology represents the only exception insofar as this scholar includes the collection of cognitive data and then analyzes them quantitatively (p. 96). His attempt is marginal within the context of the book and at the same time does not make full use of the results obtained.

As I have indicated, all the insights into the cultures investigated provide a great amount of knowledge on the ways in which these local populations handle the relationship between the international scientific discourse about climate change, their own experiences, and, in turn, their local discourses. These findings are obtained by a methodology that is traditional in cultural anthropology, thus, relying on the scholar's interpretation of the collected data. While interpretation of data is essentially unavoidable, there are ways to make the process more transparent and replicable, fundamental characteristics of more empirical sciences, including the social sciences.

The investigation of a specific concept, e.g., climate change, in a domain of knowledge is equivalent to attempting to discover the cultural model of 'climate change.' That is, a mental representation of a part of reality shared within a community (e.g., Holland and Quinn 1987). A blended qualitative and quantitative methodological path to discover cultural models has

been suggested by Bennardo and de Munck (2014) and by Bennardo (2018). A full or partial realization of that methodology in relation to cultural models of nature within the broader context of climate change is found in the research projects edited by Bennardo (2019). In agreement with the book under review, ethnographic data is deemed as the necessary mold within which to root any collection of further linguistic and cognitive data. The major differences lie in the detailed analyses on the linguistic data collected, i.e., at the word, sentence and discourse level, and in the quantitative analyses on both the linguistic and cognitive data, including consensus analysis. The accurate nature of the empirical data collection and the sophisticated quantitative analyses render the approach sufficiently transparent and possibly replicable as is necessary in scientific research.

In conclusion, I highly recommend the content of this book for the readers of this journal. The results of the research projects presented provide excellent insights into local discourses about climate change (in five cultures across the globe) that demonstrate how local knowledge blends with international scientific discourse. Some methodological shortcomings decrease the potential impact that these findings might have had on policy makers. In fact, the adoption of some quantitative procedures would have yielded fewer personal

interpretations. Thus, one could possibly better appeal to those policy makers that the book intends to inform in an attempt to make local communities heard and their members become active agents of their future.

REFERENCES CITED

- Bennardo, G., Ed. 2019 *Cultural models of nature: primary food producers and climate change*. London: Routledge.
- Bennardo, G. 2018 Cultural models theory. *Anthropology News* website, July 17, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/AN.919>
- Bennardo, G. and V.C. de Munck 2014 *Cultural models: Genesis, methods, and experiences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, D. and N. Quinn, Eds. 1987 *Cultural models in language and thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.