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Are global citizens also environmentally conscious?

In her latest study, SMU Associate Professor of Psychology Angela Leung successfully links two different concepts

POLLUTION affects many countries around the world. Singapore's haze is just one example. What can be done to make people more environmentally friendly?

In a recently completed study, Associate Professor Angela Leung from the School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU) gives an interesting suggestion – make them more cosmopolitan by encouraging an openness to different cultures.

"When you try to resolve environmental problems, people don't think about culture. You just try to educate people and increase their awareness," she says.

"Given the multi-ethnic nature of society, and the serious pollution faced by different countries, one way to resolve these problems is from the cultural perspective."

In a recently completed study, Prof Leung, a psychology professor who was born in Hong Kong and obtained her doctorate in the US, demonstrates links between cosmopolitanism and environmental consciousness.

Put simply, people who are cosmopolitan – culturally open, who feel morally obligated to the world, and respect cultural diversity – tend to be more environmentally friendly. Along the way, she accomplished another goal in her research to develop an internally consistent scale with which to measure people's cosmopolitan tendencies. "Cosmopolitanism is talked about in philosophy, political science, and sociology, mainly in theoretical terms, but not a lot of research has been done to empirically test the idea," she explains. "So I wanted to develop a scale of cosmopolitan orientation, and use it to measure, predict other things, like environmental tendencies."

Measuring cosmopolitanism and environmental friendliness

Prof Leung conducted the study over the past one and a half years, with Singaporean and Australian students as well as online participants from America.

She first attempts to measure the degree of cosmopolitanism among people through a 15-question survey asking people to agree or disagree with various statements.

The survey tests for three characteristics. The first is cultural openness. This is the traditional way which people define cosmopolitanism, and refers to a belief that there are a lot of things to be learnt by connecting to people of other cultures.

A question asked in this area can be: "It is

exciting to be immersed in a foreign culture".

The second characteristic is what Prof Leung terms as global pro-socialism. Pro-socialism refers to a tendency for pro social behaviour, or behaviour aimed at helping others. This is akin to a sense of global justice.

For example, this characteristic can manifest itself as a willingness to help people protect their basic human rights.

"It's a sense of moral responsibility, not rooted just locally but also globally, the sense that I want to help people regardless of their nationalities. I should protect the basic human rights of people even if they come from different cultures."

The third characteristic of cosmopolitanism is respect for cultural diversity. This refers to having a high tolerance, or appreciation for different cultures. She then tests for attitudes towards the environment. This is done directly by asking people questions like whether they will donate to an environmental organisation. Another more subtle test – using a method developed by Prof Leung's collaborator at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology – asks people what indicator they would choose to represent a country's development: economic output, life expectancy, life satisfaction, or environmental impact.

"In tests, people are usually asked about recycling, whether you use energy-saving light bulbs, whether you support environmental movements, whether you will write to the government to complain. In this test I want to see if they will pick environmental impact as an indicator," Prof Leung says.

Finally, the results from the various tests are compiled to see if there is a significant relationship between people who are judged to be cosmopolitan, and people who are judged to be environmentally friendly.

Addressing social issues

As it turns out, the two variables are positively correlated. The relationship was significant even after taking into account other factors that contribute to environmental friendliness, like one's values, beliefs and attitudes.

Prof Leung suggests that cosmopolitan people are more environmentally friendly because they tend to know more.

"You have more information from social media, you have a lot of sources, and are more aware of the transnational scope of environmental damage. You're more knowledgeable of best practices, of new

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technologies, of the serious consequences of environmental damage," she says. Cosmopolitan people might care for the environment also because they feel a connection to all of humankind. "They feel a duty to protect nature or the ecological system," she suggests.

"If cosmopolitanism is something that can be taught or developed, then people can be influenced to care for the environment," Prof Leung adds.

There might also be other benefits to encouraging people to be more cosmopolitan. People with these attributes might also be less xenophobic, she says. And on a broader level, the study might be able to predict how environmentally friendly a country's citizens will be, once their cosmopolitan orientation is measured.

"I know from my data that Australians have a pretty high cosmopolitan orientation. Among the three countries I studied, compared to Singapore and the US, Australians also have the highest environmental friendliness score. Australians care for their natural environment and are proud of their resources," she says.

This is not the first time Prof Leung is applying her research on cosmopolitanism to practical matters. In an experiment done in the US when she was a PhD student, she tried to see if people who are exposed to other cultural experiences tend to be more creative.

She showed different cultural items, through a 45-minute multimedia slideshow, to randomly assigned groups of Caucasian American undergraduates. Some saw just images depicting American culture, like the Statue of Liberty, Mickey Mouse, or a hamburger. Others saw just images depicting Chinese culture, like the Forbidden City, a hotpot dinner, and the Great Wall of China. Another group saw images depicting a cultural mix, for example mooncakes made by Starbucks, or a Coca-Cola glass bottle encased by the ceramic likeness of a Chinese dragon. Yet another group saw American and Chinese images presented side by side.

Who is more creative?

She then asked each group to do some creative tasks, like rewriting the Cinderella fairy tale for children in Turkey by adding creative elements. Coders then ranked each story. "It seems like an easy task but a lot of students rewrite the same story. Some creative students included new things, like how Cinderella is a model, met a billionaire on a beach, and went to space for a honeymoon."

As it turned out, students presented with either the fusion images or the juxtaposed images were more creative with their storytelling.

Intriguingly, those who were shown just Chinese images were not more creative.

Meanwhile, the effects of viewing images from a different culture lasted for a while. Five to seven days later, participants were asked to take part in another creativity test – to give analogies of time. Again, those who outperformed were the ones who had been shown images of different cultures simultaneously, or in a fusion-like way.

Students had actively compared two different cultures and were inspired as a result, Prof Leung suggests. Yet another study on Caucasian American undergraduates measured their creativity by asking them to come up with unusual uses for a garbage bag – like using it to make salad or using it as a shelter – or writing down the first 20 occupations that come to mind. People who came from a multicultural background, such as being exposed to different cuisines, music, or friends, turned out to have more creative answers.

"The story is not that simple. This doesn't mean multicultural people are more creative. Under time pressure, this doesn't work. Also, this is more relevant if people are also open to new experiences," she says.

Those who might have a multicultural background but who are not open to new experiences are less creative, she notes.

Looking ahead, Prof Leung plans to expand her research on cosmopolitanism to xenophobia, or negative sentiment against foreigners. "I want to look at a socially relevant phenomenon. I can potentially also look at creativity again, how a cosmopolitan individual is more creative, how people can be developed into a cosmopolitan person and does age or the number of different cultures in which people live matter?"

The topic is complex. It should not be assumed that people who have lived in different cultures are more cosmopolitan, for they can feel threatened by the differences, she notes.

This is a monthly series by the Singapore Management University. Next month's feature will discuss various challenges in mobile computing security.