

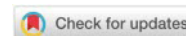
# EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF DEVELOPING OF ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** In the modern world one of the most present problems is the state of living environment and its protection and preservation. In this context, forming of ecological identity is highly important in the aim of creating the basis for pro-ecological behaviors which could allow to present and future generations quality survival on the Earth. Ecological identity is related to the relation of human being to the nature, his/her connection with the nature as to cognitive, affective and behavioral elements by which we are acquiring knowledge about nature, developing emotional relation to it which is manifested in behavioral segment. Development of stronger or weaker ecological identity determines our motivation for pro-ecological behaviors. We can find the basis of ecological identity in two basic orientation to the nature, anthropocentric and eco-centric orientations where both of them include high evaluation of the importance of the nature for human kind but where anthropocentric orientation puts emphasis on human being and the need for preservation of nature for human wellbeing and improving of the quality of human life while eco-centric orientation puts emphasis on intrinsic value of the nature that should be preserved for its own. Development of ecological identity begins in the early childhood and educational process and the process of socialization take part in it and that is the way in which pro-ecological norms and values, later attitudes are instilling in the child. As facts of a high importance, in literature it is stressed staying and activities in nature where children make direct connection with the bounties of nature gradually realizing its values and developing habits which will contribute to its preservation. Such influences begin in the family but, it is very important that preschool institutions and early grades of primary school have developed programs of ecological education and adequate methods for its implementation. Development of ecological identity is continuing further through later schooling and through organizational ecological identity which should be the part of organizational culture. The aim of this work is elucidation of meaning of ecological identity, about which there has not been many discussions in our country, analysis of the factors which are participating in its development and of the role of educational process in forming and further development of ecological identity as the foundation of the pro-ecological behavior.

**Keywords:** ecological identity, anthropocentric orientation, eco-centric orientation, educational process

**Field:** Humanities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis results from diverse factors like lifestyle choices, behaviors, corporate interests, and environmental protection shortcomings. Ward (cited in Corraliza & Collado, 2019) links the crisis to inadequate adaptive behavior driven by human values and beliefs. Ecologically responsible behavior involves awareness, understanding, and active participation in environmental protection (Hungerford & Volk, 1990).

Education is pivotal in fostering pro-environmental behavior. Lehman and Geller (2004) highlight educational aspects like information, encouragement, modeling, and commitment. This study aims to explore ecological identity's role in overall identity development, shaped significantly by environmental education.

## 2. ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

Ecological identity encompasses individuals' perceptions of their connection to the Earth, shaping their personality and self-awareness (Tomashow: Clayton, Opatow, 2004: 407). Clayton (2003) underscores its significance in self-concept formation, emphasizing nature's intrinsic importance. In literature, terms like connectedness to nature, ecological identity, and ecological self-identity are closely related (Balunde et al., 2019). Two core attitudes define ecological identity: anthropocentric and ecocentric (Thompson, Barton, 1994). Anthropocentric views prioritize nature for human well-being, while ecocentric perspectives highlight nature's intrinsic value and spiritual significance (Naess, Gleeson, Light: Kopnina, Cocis, 2017).

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Ecocentric thinking introduces ecological intelligence, vital for the future according to Gardner (Strongoli, 2023). McCallum (2008) eloquently depicts ecological intelligence as a profound connection with Earth, transcending egocentric limitations.

Schultz (Schultz: Balunde et al., 2019) highlights humans' intricate relationship with nature, emphasizing cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. Connectedness, concern, and commitment to the environment reflect this relationship, shaping pro-environmental actions. Connectedness to nature, as Schultz describes, measures how individuals integrate nature into their self-perception (Walton, Jones, 2018). Ecological literacy, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, fosters environmentally responsible behavior (Bruyere, 2008). Golubchikova et al. (2019) link ecological literacy with ecological identity through environmental education, leading to shifts in values and personal growth. Clayton connects the behavioral aspect of ecological identity with ecocentric attitudes and universal values (Clayton: Walton, Jones, 2018). Further research (Wang et al., 2021) identifies four dominant ecological value orientations – altruistic, biospheric, egoistic, and hedonistic – influencing ecological identity and pro-environmental behavior. Individuals exhibit varying degrees of these values, influencing their motivation for environmentally responsible actions (Stern: Kollmuss, Agyeman, 2002).

Certain aspects of ecological identity, such as nature appreciation and respect, align with nature connectedness, which strongly predicts pro-environmental behavior (Olivos, Aragonés, 2011). Ecological self-identity encompasses general adherence to pro-environmental actions and specific affiliations with environmental groups (Van der Werff: Balunde et al., 2019). Studies show that a heightened ecological self-identity correlates with increased pro-environmental behavior (Zheng et al., 2021). Pro-environmental conduct involves individual actions within society concerning the environment, often accompanied by affective states like guilt and outrage (Perez Ibara et al., 2020). The focus of ecological discourse should center on the outcomes of pro-environmental behavior rather than just human actions (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). People assume various roles as environmental advocates, but action is unlikely without integrating environmental concepts into their ecological identity (Holland, 2003). Thus, the behavioral dimension entails internalizing values and attitudes.

### 3. DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY

While some suggest an innate aspect to environmental identity through the biophilia hypothesis, most evidence supports environmental identity's formation through personal experiences and surroundings. Early cultivation of this identity by significant adults, such as parents, who facilitate meaningful nature experiences, is crucial. These adults serve as role models, evolving over time from parents to teachers and peers, contributing to stable self-identity formation. Emotional connections with nature from these figures lead to cognitive responses, shaping environmental identity in childhood. Environmental identity in early childhood involves physical, emotional, and cognitive awareness of one's relationship with nature. Dewey argues that identity development occurs through interactions, with the child's interpretation of experiences playing a key role, emphasizing the significance of understanding children's interpretive processes by influential adults.

To foster environmental identity, preschools and early grades should prioritize robust environmental education programs, capitalizing on the developmental malleability of this period. Vidosavljević (2021) outlines the goals of such education, aiming to instill independence, responsibility, trust, authentic expression, moral and social values, interests, intellectual and creative capacities, and awareness of environmental preservation. Wilson (2011) recommends practical steps for nurturing a positive environmental self-identity: providing frequent outdoor experiences with natural materials, offering tangible resources for direct nature observation, incorporating nature-themed materials in classrooms, facilitating discussions about nature, engaging children in hands-on activities like planting and caring for plants and animals, using literature with ecological themes, encouraging children to share their nature experiences, and informing parents about the purpose and benefits of environmental education.

Early environmental education, crucial for receptive learning, profoundly shapes adult attitudes and behaviors. This connection between childhood learning and later pro-environmental conduct underscores the significance of environmental themes (Clayton, 2020). Alongside influential role models, determining when parents impart nature knowledge and when children explore independently is vital (Baillie: Neralić, 2022). Wilson stresses the goal of fostering an environmental identity, aiming for individuals with a positive relationship with nature (Wilson, 2011: 104).

Personality traits are argued to be key predictors of pro-environmental behavior by some scholars (Stern, 2000), with early temperament strongly shaping future attitudes and values. Palmer emphasizes the importance of character traits conducive to persistence (Palmer: Vidosavljević et al., 2022). Early

nature experiences significantly predict later pro-environmental behavior (Evans et al., 2018), with positive encounters in nature mediating pro-environmental attitudes (Morita, 2014; Roczen et al., 2012).

Some scholars challenge the Linear Model (Kollmuss, Agyeman, 2002), suggesting that various environmental education programs may not significantly shape pro-ecological attitudes and awareness. Instead, they argue that childhood experiences with nature, positive memories thereof, and influential role models like family and teachers who demonstrate eco-friendly behaviors play a pivotal role (Chawla 1999, Wells & Lekies 2006, Duerden & Witt 2010; Corraliza, Collado, 2019).

Ecological identity forms through direct nature interaction, emotional ties with natural elements, and recognizing a connection with nature as part of oneself (Clayton, 2003; Williams & Chawla, 2015). Kempton and Holland introduce "social ecological identity," where individuals identify with environmental reference groups (Kempton, Holland, 2003). Tabenkova links ecological identity to self-determination influenced by cultural-historical and personal nature experiences (Tabenkova: Golubchikova et al., 2019). This process involves developing ecological knowledge and fostering harmony between nature, society, and the individual. Nature experiences prompt intrinsic motivation to form meaningful relationships, as noted by Irkhin (2020). Similarly, Bruni et al. (2021) identify attitudes toward nature, connectedness, and self-respect as integral to ecological identity, shaped by repeated positive nature experiences.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Maintaining a balanced human-nature relationship is vital today. Ecological identity arises from nature interactions and understanding oneself within society (Clayton, 2003), involving self-categorization (Kempton, Holland, 2003). It revolves around attitudes and values, notably anthropocentric and ecocentric orientations. Ecocentric views prioritize nature's well-being over human comfort, driven by intrinsic motives, while anthropocentric ones prioritize human welfare, fueled by extrinsic motivations (Kopina, Cociș, 2017).

Ecological identity forms through childhood experiences and role models. To nurture it, values, attitudes, empathy, and altruism should prioritize social and biocentric values (Wang et al., 2021). Education is crucial, facilitating direct nature contact, outdoor activities, and using natural materials (Wilson, 2011; Vidosavljević, 2022). Cognitive, affective, and motivational processes shape behavior, with knowledge depth and process intensity determining overall ecological identity strength, and relationship diversity influencing specific ecological identities.

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