Research emerging from Deakin University examines the response of rural and regional stakeholders to government implemented environmental development projects by applying theories of procedural justice. Current research extends a 2008 pilot survey of water-saving attitudes in Wonthaggi, a rural town in Victoria, where a desalination plant is being built (King, 2008). Though not the focus, what emerged in the pilot survey was a strong statistical relationship between local support for the plant and the perceived fairness of the implementation process. While ‘procedural justice’ literature examines the link between support for governance measures and their perceived ‘fairness’, the application of procedural justice to environmental development contexts is limited. The current project is gathering quantitative and qualitative data which specifically targets local perceptions of ‘fairness’ towards the Wonthaggi desalination plant development.

So, what is procedural justice and why is the application of these theories to environmental contexts significant? Why people choose to cooperate with or defy decisions made by institutions has been the topic of much psychological research since the late 1950s (e.g., Easton, 1958; French & Raven, 1959; Tyler, 1990; 1994; 1997; Tyler & Lind, 1992). According to Tyler and Smith (1998), people’s behaviour is strongly linked to views about justice and injustice. Procedural justice, in particular, concerns the perceived fairness of the procedures involved in decision-making and the perceived treatment one receives from the decision maker. The procedural justice literature demonstrates that people’s reactions to their personal experiences with authorities are rooted in their evaluations of the fairness of procedures those agencies use to exercise their authority (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2000; 2001; Tyler & Blader, 2000).

Empirical evidence collected across a broad range of contexts and with a broad range of people has shown that when people feel they have been treated fairly by an authority or organisation they will be more likely to trust that organisation and be inclined to accept its decisions and follow its directions (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Murphy, 2004; Tyler & Degoe, 1996). It has also been found that people are most likely to challenge a situation collectively when they believe that the procedures are unfair.

While recognising that the work done on procedural justice is broad (and expanding) in focus (Gross, 2007: 2729), our use of the literature reflects the growth of its application to issues of environmental development. The role of procedural justice in relation to environmental developments has drawn recent attention from researchers partially due to the complexity of such issues in relation to contested aims, complex and speculative science (Dwyer, King and Minnegal, 2008), the range of actors involved and the vagaries of political processes (King 2003); where outcomes are less straightforward, issues of procedure take on a greater importance. One of the barriers to perceptions of fairness include past political tensions and ‘perceived power imbalances’ between those concerned (Syne & Nancarrow, 2001:344-5). In Wonthaggi, the perception that political bias manifests in vote-driven favouritism towards Melbournians, as well as a discourse which emphasises the distinction between those from the regional Wonthaggi area, on the one hand, and those from the city of Melbourne, on the other, are relevant to the perceived procedural justice surrounding the issue.

The current research focuses broadly on issues of ‘procedural justice’, as well as the related theoretical ‘fields of deliberative democracy’ and ‘social identity theories’, as these relate to the challenges of implementing environmental development projects in rural and regional Australia. While social identity theories have been developed in the procedural justice literature they have not yet been applied to deliberative democracy research. Deliberative democracy has so far taken much of its emphasis from the political science field, with social psychological and anthropological theories not yet having been applied. In this regard our research will be highly innovative theoretically, as well as contributing to the limited application of procedural justice (and related) theories to environmental development contexts.

The research team plans to convene a workshop in November 2009 at the newly established Alfred Deakin Research Institute at Deakin University, involving scholars working in similar fields as well as those in industry, to discuss the team’s work to date as well as general issues of procedural justice in the context of environmental development projects. The aim of the workshop is to develop a shared dialogue on the diverse experiences of those associated with natural resource development projects in rural and regional areas, drawing on academic and industry expertise. The possibility of an edited volume emerging from the workshop has been considered. Anyone interested in the research or wishing to participate in the November workshop should contact Tanya King at Deakin University (tanya.king@deakin.edu.au) or Kristina Murphy at the Alfred Deakin Research Institute (kristina.murphy@deakin.edu.au).

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A full list of references are available from the authors.