

Research Paper

Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry

Shivansh Miyan^{1*}

ABSTRACT

This research with the help of qualitative and quantitative methods investigates how favorable early encounters with nature shape an individual's environmental identity and behavior. With an emphasis on their positive early experiences with nature, the research uses in-depth interviews and questionnaire-based approach to investigate young people's lived experiences and views regarding their engagement with the natural world. This study is designed to examine how anticipated childhood experiences in nature may shape participants' environmental identity and their views towards sustainable development. Through in-depth interviews the study will explore personal experiences, memories, and emotions around them in childhood and their anticipated implications for the environment attitude and sustainable behavior in adulthood. The findings reveal that positive childhood experience in nature forms environmental identity and enhances individuals' engagement with sustainable practices. Insights gained from this research have highlighted the importance of fostering positive relationship with the nature during childhood for environmental education, sense of connection with the environment and sustainable behavior.

Keywords: *Environmental identity, sustainable development, identity, qualitative methods*

Chipko movement, a nonviolent movement led by women in the 1970s working to save trees in the government approved logging areas. This non – violent process led to a 15 year ban on parts of West Uttar Pradesh (Petruzzello M, 2023). Researchers studying environmental movements mark Chipko movement as a source of inspiration for others. Being involved in such movements reflect a strong sense of environmental identity to take action and advocating for causes they care about.

Environmental identity is defined as “a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the ways in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are” Clayton, S. (2003). Several approaches suggest that identity is an important predictor of pro-environmental behaviours (Clayton,

¹Research Scholar

*Corresponding Author

Received: July 07, 2024; Revision Received: October 30, 2024; Accepted: November 04, 2024

Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry

2003; Fielding and Hornsey, 2016; van der Werff, et al., 2013). Sustainable development can be defined as core concept global development and agenda that provides a stage for society to interact with the environment while not risking or damaging it for the future (Abubakar I.R., 2017)

This research paper explores we consider the role of positive childhood experiences (PCE) with nature in shaping environmental identity and commitment to sustainable development. By examining the link through qualitative research, we can develop more robust strategies to cultivate environmental consciousness in the generations to come

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **The climate crisis and need for pro-active action:**

A recent report by the World Health Organisation highlighted the severity of the climate change in the Northern states of India, mentioning extreme weather events due to climate change have led to 17 out of 20 people in India being vulnerable to extreme disasters like flood, drought and cyclone (WHO,2022). This highlights the importance of fostering a pro-environment attitude and taking necessary steps needed.

- **Childhood nature experiences and environmental association:**

Research conducted by Cleary et al. (2020) found that “both past childhood nature experiences and duration of current nature experiences significantly predicted nature connection”. Affective connection with the environment plays a significant role in predicting intentions to engage with the natural environment, moreover it can increase the level of connectedness people feel towards it (Hinds & Sparks, 2008).

- **Link between rural upbringing and environmental identity:**

It has been found out that participants from rural childhood reported stronger identification and stronger pro-environment behaviour when compared to the urban participants (Hind & Sparks, 2008), this is supported by the view that living close to nature may positively lead to the children’s attitude towards the environment (Cheng & Monroe, 2012).

Sustainable development enhances human quality of life while preserving the natural environment (Osipov & Осипов, 2019). Nature and nurture plays an equal role in influencing sustainable development (Lucia et al., 2022)

- **Gaps in Knowledge and Future Research Directions:**

While the existing literature suggests a link between childhood nature experiences and environmental outcomes, further research is needed to:

Diversity –Most of the study focus on the western population. Inclusion of various factors like Geographical location, socioeconomic status and specific experiences that lead to formation of environmental identity in different cultures are needed.

Use of qualitative methods - Very few studies focused on the qualitative methods for data interpretation. Qualitative method can be useful in this very research question as it will help the researcher get into deeper meaning and analysis of the data.

Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry

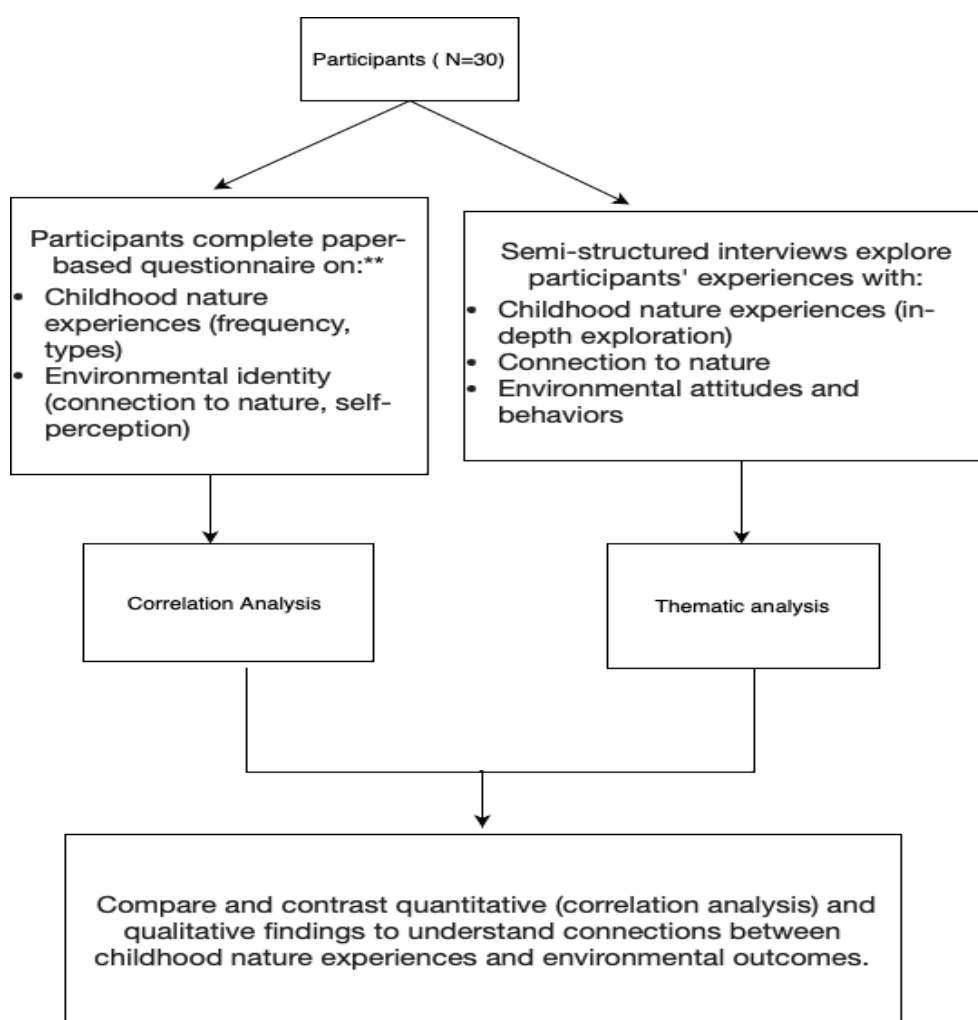
The present study

Based on the considerations reviewed above, the current study aims to enrich the understanding of this link by the use of a mixed method approach. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data from young adults, the study will provide a nuanced understanding of how childhood nature experiences shapes environment identity and commitment to sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a convergent parallel mixed method design. Quantitative data was collected using standardised questionnaire, while qualitative data was gathered through semi-structure interview. This combined approach aimed at reaching out to the inclusive understanding of the research question by capturing the trends in childhood nature experience (quantitative) and the deeper meaning and experiences of an individual (qualitative). The quantitative approach deemed to measure Positive Experiences in Nature (PEN) and Environmental identity (EI). Figure 1 demonstrates the structure of the methods used.

Figure 1 (Methodology)



Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry

Sample

Qualitative data

The study aimed to measure childhood nature experiences, environmental identity and sustainable behaviour. Recruitment strategies included-

- Tele Interviews by sending flyers in different groups.
- Face to face interviews with target population keeping in mind the age range.

Standardised questionnaire were designed to measure-

- Childhood nature experiences – the questionnaire measured participants role, connection and importance of nature in the childhood.
- Environmental identity -the questionnaire measured the participants perceived closeness to nature and their perception of the environment as a whole.

Thirty college students (52%female, 48%male.), ranging from ages 19-26, provided data for the study. Most participants were between the ages of 19-25. In terms of geographical area, 19 participants were permanent residents of Uttarakhand, 7 were permanent residents of Uttar Pradesh and 4 were permanent residents of Delhi-NCR.

Table 1

Sample distribution table (Qualitative and Quantitative data)

Characteristics	Description
No. of Participants	30
Age range	19-26
Average age	21.2
Gender distribution	Male - 48% Female – 52 %

Measures

Quantitative data

1. Connection with the natural world - It is measured using the Connectedness to Nature scale, or CNS (Mayer & Frantz, 2004) to measure their perceived amount of connectedness to nature. The scale consists of 14 items that measure individuals' levels of feeling emotionally connected to the natural world). Participants responded on a 5-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree. The reliability of the scale is $\alpha = .84$.
2. Childhood Nature experiences - CNE was assessed using the child positive experiences in nature scale, which consists of 5 items, and it examines the direct and indirect relationships of outdoor recreation participation during childhood and adulthood. The scale was developed for the current study due to unavailability of pre-existing measures. Responses were measured on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The reliability of the scale for the current study is $\alpha = .80$

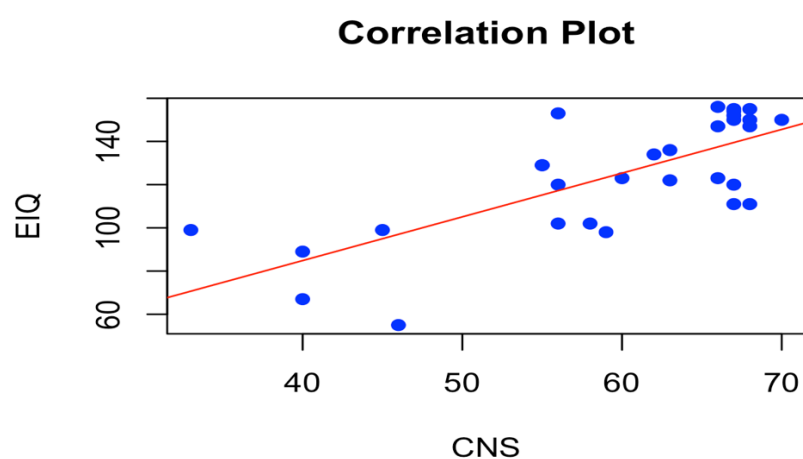
Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry

3. Environment identity - Environmental Identity (EID) scale was used to assess this variable. The EID is used to measure individual differences in connectedness to the environment, taking into account both affective and cognitive facets of human psyche (Clayton 2003).

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed positive linear correlation ($r=0.73$, $p< 0.05$) between the variables childhood positive experiences and environmental identity. This relation indicated that young adults who reported frequent childhood nature experiences scored higher on the environmental scale identity, these findings are demonstrated in Figure 2 (scatterplot of environmental identity scores vs childhood nature experiences)



Qualitative data analysis

- **Impact of Family and experiences in nature**

Participants who reported spending time with family in the nature, recalled them as one of the most significant memory they had in nature. They emphasized the role of family in shaping their attitudes towards environment. One participant described the role of family as:

“The most memorable day for me, when i felt the closest to nature was the first and last visit to gullar ghati, a place that had no population at that time, a place surrounded by trees and a river that I don't know the name of. My family including my brother, cousins and my mama were out on a picnic. We all went in the river, played, tried standing because of the slippery stones covered with algae...we all explored a little farther through the river into the depths of the place with more dense trees, we were still drenched in the river, there, we held no power against the force of the water and we all kids were getting swayed away, I remember that my mamaji clung to the branch of a tree, grabbing one of the arms of my cousin as he is being pushed away by the force and we all made a trail behind him holding onto one another, we could've easily gotten washed away with the waters...but that moment was filled with fear and laughter at the same time. This picnic is and will always be close to my memories of childhood, I have never looked at nature the same way” (saumya, 20)

Most of the participants emphasised on the role of their grandparents in shaping their attitude towards the environment. Participants who spent time with their grandparents spoke fondly of those experiences. One participant mentioned:

Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry

“My mom would take me to Tehri when I was small..... alright I insisted her to take her as I used to enjoy in the village. My dada dadi used to live there. Dadi would take me to mango farms, and we would pick the mangoes. This is and will be one of the most vibrant memories of my childhood” (Aarush, 22)

- **Garden and a sense of connectedness**

Participants who had gardens in their house while growing up described their experiences stemming up from playing there. Most of the participants who moved out of their ancestral house told that they plan to have a garden of their own. One participant described their experience as:

“I’ve not explored the outside world much in my childhood...but my favourite exploration pass time was climbing to those extended branches of their trees from the edge of the roofs of our house along with my cousins and walk through those areas with no railings and make tents over there with bedsheets that we all could gather and eat chips inside that. We would play all day in the garden, climb the trees and eat fruits under the tree” (Alok, 22)

Challenges and Opportunities

Some participants narrated their experience in the developing cities. They exhibit strong dislike towards the constant development at the cost of nature. In addition, most of the participants show a sense of agency and believe in being proactive in environment change.

One participant emphasized on their desire to contribute to the changing environment as “We need to sustain our environment for our future generations to come and ensure a healthy lifestyle and provide a good environment to live and survive. I wish to help our farmers with their agricultural practices and ensure availability of vegetables in years to come and contribute in preventing any damages henceforth by the little I could do whether it is switching to electric vehicles or solar panels, etc” (Avinash)

Integration

The quantitative analysis revealed a positive linear relationship between positive childhood experiences in nature and environmental identity indicating the importance of childhood nature experiences in shaping our environmental identity.

The qualitative analysis delved deeper into the stories of the participants and provided rich content for the above findings. Participants discussed how childhood nature experiences led to formation of their positive attitudes towards the environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study suggests that childhood nature experiences shape young adults environmental identity and their views towards sustainable development. For some participants these experiences led to development of a proactive voice towards environment. Participants experiences in nature such as gardening, playing in the nature, exploring forests inspired their love and care towards the environment.

REFERENCES

- Abubakar, I. R. (2017). Access to Sanitation Facilities among Nigerian Households: Determinants and Sustainability Implications. *Sustainability*, 9(4), 547. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9040547>
- Abubakar, I. R. (2017). Access to Sanitation Facilities among Nigerian Households: Determinants and Sustainability Implications. *Sustainability*, 9(4), 547. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9040547>
- Astell-Burt, T., Mitchell, R., & Hartig, T. (2014). The association between green space and mental health varies across the lifecourse. A longitudinal study. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 68(6), 578–583. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2013-203767>
- Canter, D. V., & Craik, K. H. (1981). Environmental psychology. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 1(1), 1–11. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0272-4944\(81\)80013-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0272-4944(81)80013-8)
- Clayton, S., Czellar, S., Nartova-Bochaver, S., Skibins, J. C., Salazar, G., Tseng, Y.-C., Irkhin, B., & Monge-Rodriguez, F. S. (2021). Cross-Cultural Validation of A Revised Environmental Identity Scale. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 2387. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042387>
- Colombo, D., Suso-Ribera, C., Fernández-Álvarez, J., Cipresso, P., Garcia-Palacios, A., Riva, G., & Botella, C. (2020). Affect Recall Bias: Being Resilient by Distorting Reality. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 44, 906–918. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-020-10122-3>
- Hinds, J., & Sparks, P. (2008). Engaging with the natural environment: The role of affective connection and identity. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 28(2), 109–120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2007.11.001>
- Osipov, V. I. (2019). Environmental aspects of sustainable development. *Вестник Российской Академии Наук*, 89(7), 718–727. <https://doi.org/10.31857/s0869-5873897718-727>
- Osipov, V. I. (2019). Environmental aspects of sustainable development. *Вестник Российской Академии Наук*, 89(7), 718–727. <https://doi.org/10.31857/s0869-5873897718-727>
- Petruzzello, M. (2024, June 17). *Chipko movement*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chipko-movement>
- Restall, B., Conrad, E., 2015. A literature review of connectedness to nature and its potential for environmental management. *J. Environ. Manag.* 159, 264–278. doi:10.1016/j.jenvman.2015.05.022.
- Suchert, V., Hanewinkel, R., & Isensee, B. (2015). Sedentary behavior and indicators of mental health in school-aged children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Preventive Medicine*, 76, 48–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.03.026>
- Tseng, Y.-C., & Wang, S.-M. (2020). Understanding Taiwanese adolescents' connections with nature: Rethinking conventional definitions and scales for environmental education. *Environmental Education Research*, 26(1), 115–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2019.1668354>
- Vreja, L. O., & Bălan, S. (2019). Sustainable Development From a “Nature vs. Nurture” Perspective. In *Advances in Environmental Engineering and Green Technologies* (pp. 118–135). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-5739-5.ch006>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

**Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults;
Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry**

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Miyan, S. (2024). Exploring the Role of Positive Childhood Experiences in Nature in Shaping Young Adults; Environmental Identity and Commitment to Sustainable Development: A Mixed Method enquiry. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4), 899-906. DIP:18.01.084.20241204, DOI:10.25215/1204.084