

Options, thresholds, and agreements

There may well be very strong causal relations between available options and behavioral thresholds in individual and collective human behaviors. No doubt option quality is as important as quantity, but in fact, it appears that the fundamental relationship is such that options act as inverse constraints; the fewer the options, the higher the likelihood that (usually negative) behavioral thresholds will be crossed. This phenomenon is well illustrated when options are tied to the allocation agreements for essential natural resources: water, food, energy.

As an example with quite mild behavioral thresholds, Dent (2008) describes the distinctive individual and collective outcomes from reduced options for water usage because of federal enforcement actions under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in two agricultural communities in the Pacific Northwest. Surely the cited distinctions in civic competency (the community skill set) and civic enterprise (the community history) between the two communities are valuable constructs to help explain response differences, yet below the academic analysis there seems to be a deeper, more fundamental type of decision-making that has to do with the potential accessibility to perceived options. Thus civic capacity would be more about the community's level of mental flexibility and creativity than about its skills and history, per se. Senge (2006) explores this idea under the rubric of mental models and their impacts on the creation of a successful learning organization. And Jaynes and Bretthorst (2003) show that it is possible to quantify the impact of new information on an individual given even a rough mapping of the individual's internal value system (i.e., the assignment of truth-value probabilities to a collection of belief objects).

All of the above bears on the ability of various special interests to form workable, allocation agreements with respect to the essential ecosystem service of clean, fresh water – for which, by the way, there is no substitute. Because of the additional jurisdictional and legal complications surrounding water, it would seem wise to uncover and explicate the internal states of the stakeholders before negotiations begin in earnest. Otherwise, a perceived lack of options is most likely to engender bad behavior in many, if not all, of the folks at the table.

References

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