



Quest for Personal Significance, Epiphany and other influencing experiences

In the BIOMOT project life-history interviews are held in all seven countries with committed actors. The analysis of the interviews are focused on past experiences of each interviewee across three periods of her/his life: 0-15 years; 15-25 years; 25 years- until now. The aim is to identify differences and similarities in the experiences among the two groups in our sample namely committed actors for nature and committed actors for other societal goals. This is done in order to identify which experiences have been more important in motivating the interviewee to act for biodiversity and nature protection.

To reach our aim we focused on the study of the experiences in three different theoretical frameworks. First of all, we investigated the role of one of the more important forces in motivating a person to strongly commit her/his energies and time for a cause, as the *Quest for Personal Significance* (also mentioned in the "Common Framework" document; Kruglanski, 2009). This general motivational force is activated in different ways and traumatic and frustrating events (negative experiences) play an important role. We did not only focus our study on negative events but also on the positive events in which the positive emotions play a central role in motivating people to act for biodiversity and nature protection. For such aim, we referred to the *Environmental Epiphanies*, a particular kind of *peak experiences* (Maslow, 1968, 1970, 1971) that occur in relation with the natural environment, recently theorised by Vining and Merrick (2012) and characterised by positive emotions. Finally, we wanted to identify the experiences that could deeply differ among our sample (acting for nature vs acting for society). Indeed, following a previous study of Chawla (1999) we examined past experiences that seem to influence the environmental commitment in different stages of life. These can be: experiences lived through during childhood in contact with nature (e.g. holidays, travels, plays, etc.); influences and values that the family passed down; participation to environmental organisation and associations; etc.

In order to operationalise the above mentioned models, some models are coded on the total sample of interviews and some are coded on a sub-sample of English translated interviews. The choice of choosing a subsample for some of the coding had been time and workload constraint, especially due to the complexities in inter-team and inter-language agreement and standardisation.

The provisional results, also presented during the Slovenian meeting (22-26 September 2014), were carried out by coding and analysing the past experiences, briefly described above, on an interviews' sub- sample. In particular, we coded and analysed: 25 interviews on a total of 215 interviews for the *Environmental Epiphanies*; 25 interviews on a total of 88 interviews for the outdoor activities, the traumatic and frustrating events and the *search of meaning*. The *Environmental Epiphany* (Vining and Merrick, 2012) is "an experience in which one's perception of essential meaning of her/his relationship with nature shifts in a meaningful manner" (Vining and Merrick, 2012, p. 497), and it is usually followed by behavioural changes. Vining and Merrick (2012, p.497) identified five kinds of *Environmental Epiphanies*:

- *Aesthetic*: An epiphany characterised by vivid and awestruck description of a place in which a participant was recognising the beauty and aesthetic value of nature and natural places. In this epiphany the positive emotions play a central role.
- *Intellectual*: An epiphany where the person was exposed to new information that allowed her/him to adjust the way she/he viewed nature and her/his relationship with nature.
- *Realization*: An epiphany characterised by the realisation of a concept to which participants were exposed, including stories that describe a new awareness, an awareness of a different option, a change in perspective, and overcoming the challenges of nature.
- *Awakening*: An epiphany characterised by a feeling of an awakening, clarity, new vividness, a shift of consciousness, an awareness of the way things should be, and nature as therapeutic and restorative. This experience is defined as life-changing, life-affirming, or turning point.
- *Connectedness*: An epiphany characterised by a feeling of immense connectedness, including the description of the self as part of something, a unification or connection with a larger whole or entity, interconnectedness, and a universal connectedness.

The provisional analysis shows that there are differences in the number and the kind of epiphanies lived through and recognised by the two groups of interviewees. First of all, the committed actors for nature recognised a higher number of epiphanies (total: 21) than committed actors for society



Group of tourists camping in Georgian Caucasus

(total: 7) almost equally distributed in the three periods of life considered (0-15; 15-25; 25 until now). These data should be considered cautiously since we are dealing with qualitative material which does not allow proper quantitative techniques. However, we can identify some tendencies in terms of higher or lower frequency of appearance among the different kinds of phenomena. The people acting for nature recognised more epiphanies in early age than the people acting for societal goals. Also, the committed actors for nature recognised a higher number of epiphanies characterised by a more cognitive involvement, such as *Intellectual Epiphanies*. Furthermore, the group of committed actors for nature is characterised by recognising

Awakening and Connectedness Epiphanies that committed actors for society do not recognise. In general, it seems that the committed actors for nature lived through epiphanies earlier than the committed actors for society, also these Epiphanies are characterised by a more cognitive involvement, a higher reflection about nature and the environment, while the socially oriented people lived through epiphanies later and recognised more often the *Aesthetic Epiphanies*. Also, recognizing the *Connectedness Epiphanies*, the actors for nature testify to have a more deep spiritual connection with nature than the actors for society. In the interviews we also identified different kinds of activities:

- Informal outdoor recreational activities;
- Formal activities (with associations, e.g. scout);
- Outdoor activities with self-educated exploratory approach to nature;
- Outdoor activities with family (parents, grandparents, uncles, etc.);

- Outdoor activities with people who are out of the family (professors, association leaders, etc.);
- Sports.

In general these activities are more present in the people acting for nature group than the people acting for society, and they seem to be present only in the early stage of life (0-15; 15-25). Furthermore, the early experiences in natural environment with the family or alone, but with an exploratory approach, moved by the curiosity of learning, are more present in the people acting for nature. In particular, the relationship with nature seems to be mediated by the relationship that the family of the interviewee has with nature. These provisional results also revealed differences about the main sports of the committed actors for nature and for society played in the early stage of life (0-15; 15-25): in particular, the sports that seem to differ between the two groups are “camping” and “hiking” in childhood which are more frequent among the committed actors for nature. The *Quest for Personal Significance* (Kruglanski, 2009) is a general motivational force that goes beyond the mere survival: it is the realisation of what is culturally right to get the admiration of others (Kruglanski et al.,



Tourist hiking in Georgian Caucasus

2009), so the ideology of the group plays an important role in addressing the actions. As any other motivational force, the search for meaning must be activated in order to influence the behaviour, in particular we consider two ways of activations: frustrating and traumatic events (loss of meaning); opportunity of significance gain (gain of meaning). In general, in both committed actors for nature and for society the search of meaning can be activated by events implying both loss of significance (traumatic or frustrating events) and gain of significance: both event types, when present in a person's life, can motivate to biodiversity actions. Those events are slightly more frequent in the nature group than in the societal group. However, it is especially the consequential search of meaning which is more frequent in the committed action for nature group rather than in the committed action for society group.

More importantly, bigger differences between the two groups are about the ideology that the interviewee embraces when she/he is in the stage of search for meaning: this is the crucial factor which seems to guide the action towards a biodiversity and nature protection target or not. We identified four main kinds of "ideology" among the interviewees:

- pro-environmental ideology, in which nature is considered something to protect because of its value (nature as an end in itself);
- pro-environmental ideology as part of a pro-social ideology, where the act of nature protection is part of a more general pro-social ideology: the person acting for nature protection obtains positive results for nature and biodiversity as well as for the society at large (nature is an end and a mean too, and there is a social aim too);
- pro-social ideology via society, where the person's aim is to be useful for the society (nature is neither a mean nor an end);
- pro-social ideology via nature, where the action for nature and biodiversity protection is a mean to act for the society and in particular for the future generations (nature is a mean for a social end).

In general, both groups are committed and have a sacrificed disposition (in terms of activity and time devoted to) in their activities. The committed actors for society tend to embrace the pro-social ideology via society, indeed their commitment is finalised to action in favour of the general society. The committed actors for nature tend to embrace the other three ideologies in which the nature plays different roles (as a mean and/or aim): for them the more often embraced ideologies are pro-social ideology via nature and pro-environmental ideology as part of pro-social ideology, only few of them act for nature just because of its value, embracing the pro-environmental ideology. These results show the central role played by social elements (i.e., doing something for other people, the society, etc.) in motivating their actions to protect biodiversity and nature in general. In carrying out the analysis of the rest of the interview samples, we expect to confirm the lack of difference between acting for nature or acting for society in the search of meaning; at the same time, we expect to confirm differences in terms of the ideology among the two groups in order to clarify their role in terms of commitment in acting for biodiversity and nature protection. These results revealed interesting differences between the two groups of interviewees, confirming our hypothesis that the past experiences (positive as the Epiphanies or negative as those motivating to Significance Quest) can influence the future choices and the interests in biodiversity and nature protections (Chawla, 1999; Vining and Merrick, 2012; Kruglanski, 2009). We also obtained a clarification about the role of the family and the early experiences with nature (0-15 y) in shaping the personal relation with it. Through completing the coding and the analysis on the whole sample of interviews, we will get more clarification about the role of experiences in addressing the choices and the commitment of people in acting for biodiversity and nature. A provisional interesting result seems to be the interplay among nature and biodiversity on the one side, and the social milieu on the other side. In fact, during childhood a person gets involved with biodiversity and nature through significant others; later on in her/his life, she/he acts in favour of biodiversity and nature in order to benefit other people and the society.

(This Findings for All was written by the Italian team about data that was gathered by the whole BIOMOT team.)

