

Description of Proposed Project and Activities

Background and Previous Research: This investigation will contribute to the communication sub-discipline of environmental communication studies, which concerns human social interaction about the environment and how humans directly interface with nature. More specifically, this work will advance emerging literature on the role of gender norms and identities in environmental communication, and connections between pro-environmental and pro-feminist communication practices. Although interdisciplinary interest in environmentalism-feminism linkages traces back to the 1970s, most published communication research at this nexus has appeared within the past decade. A guiding assumption driving most of this scholarship is that systems of discourse historically enabling and legitimizing human environmental destruction tend to intertwine with those creating gender inequity. To illustrate, in the United States, a popular ideal of masculinity-as-mastery through rational and unemotional individualism, competitiveness, and physical virility impacts contexts ranging from romantic relationships to pick-up truck marketing. While values such as individualism and competitiveness are often positive and not inherently problematic, they are too often communicated through gender relations in ways that subordinate, exploit, and marginalize (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Although toxic manifestations of masculinity such as anti-feminist ridicule, sexual harassment and assault, and human trafficking are well known, less attention is given to how a masculinity-as-mastery ideal promotes anti-environmentalism as well. As recent research demonstrates, contemporary institutions most responsible for environmental destruction exemplify oppressive forms of masculinity (e.g., Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Nagel, 2016).

Fortunately, researchers, nonprofit advocacy organizations, government, and even businesses are increasingly recognizing how gender relations and environmental practices shape each other, and why it matters. To give an example, across the globe these actors are working to alleviate the disproportionate risks and unjust strife that climate change is creating for low-income women. Especially burdened are poor women of color in the rural Global South, though it should be noted that gendered climate injustice also exists in countries such as the U.S. (Nagel, 2016). Additional examples of ongoing gender-environment work are scholarly research and nonprofit advocacy for identifying and preventing industrial causes of breast cancer, and for creating environmental regulations to protect fetal and maternal health. Research on these issues uses multiple methodologies and is developing and/or drawing upon diverse theoretical frameworks. Some frameworks include environmental health and environmental justice models, science communication perspectives, risk communication theories, intersectional ecofeminist and material feminist approaches, and postcolonial theory.

The gender-environment issues briefly surveyed emphasize women's empowerment as a key goal. However, past research stresses the importance of moving beyond the false assumption that gender issues are ultimately women's issues. People of all gender identifications—perhaps especially men, are implicated as agents with a role to play. To fully understand how gender relations intertwine with how we relate with the environment, the focus must be on communication among all people. While many men are involved in environmentalism, women have historically held a majority position in the movement (McCright, 2010). Furthermore, survey research continues to show that U.S. residents tend to perceive environmentalism using a “green-feminine stereotype”—that is, they see environmentalism as feminine and not manly (Brough, Wilkie, Ma, Isaac, & Gal, 2016). Some respondents justify this stereotype by arguing that caring for the environment and its harmony is a seamless extension of the domestic nurturing role traditionally instilled in women (McCright, 2010). Other factors include popular commercial culture and political ideology. Commercial advertising has long constructed an image of environmental consciousness as feminine (Singer, 2017). With regard to political ideology, past survey research conducted in the U.S. concludes that men who are white and politically conservative report significantly less concern about all environmental risks than any other demographic group (e.g., McCright, 2010; McCright & Dunlap, 2013).

Related research on gender in environmental communication follows the assumption that we learn our identities and worldviews about gender and the environment through communication. This means equitable gender relations and sustainable environmental practices may be learned and performed

by anyone, and are not solely women's issues (Connell, 1990). Researchers advancing this argument add that the goal of reshaping traditional ideals of manliness to be pro-feminist and pro-environmentalist must be seen as a central goal of feminism as well as environmentalism (Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Plumwood, 1993). In the proposed project, how male environmentalists make sense of their masculinities is one area for close examination of communication dilemmas, opportunities, and strategies.

In addition to considering possible models for communicating these alternative masculinities, recent environmental communication research has begun to identify guiding principles for building theory and praxis at the meeting grounds of environmentalism and feminism (Singer, in press). However, the existing literature exhibits some glaring shortcomings. Most notably, prior inquiry has not used qualitative interviewing to study environmental advocates' first-hand sense-making accounts of the role of gender in environmentalism. The literature consists mostly of studies using close textual analysis of print and visual mass media representations, as well as the public discourse of relatively famous women environmental leaders. This is worrisome because it suggests that theory-building research is not adequately taking into consideration the diverse identities, first-hand experiences, and distinct viewpoints of the people and organizations performing environmental advocacy on an everyday basis. As scholars and practitioners increasingly engage urgent gender-environment issues and promote alliances between environmentalism and feminism, it is vital that they carefully align theory and practice.

When it comes to praxis, a few studies including my own past scholarship (Singer, 2017; in press) show that nonprofit environmental advocacy organizations have the potential to be successful cultivators of a "feminist consciousness" (e.g., Connell, 1990; Hunt, 2014; Pezzullo, 2003). Although these studies provide hope, more work is required to understand how this may be accomplished in daily practice. Obstacles such as the green-feminine stereotype remain formidable. Toward identifying and transcending such obstacles, the proposed investigation seeks new praxis strategies. As further explained below, the use of in-depth interviewing in this investigation will be central to completing several research goals.

Proposed Project: This interview study will directly build upon my well-established, long-term, and award-winning research program in environmental communication studies. This research will specifically draw from and add to the theoretical insights of two solo-authored and peer-reviewed scholarly articles on gender in environmental communication that I have published in major international journals in the field in recent years (Singer, 2017; in press). The first of these two studies developed an original theoretical concept and the second laid out a detailed theoretical framework to be applied through work such as that sketched in this fellowship application.

Additionally, this investigation functions as an offshoot of my Fall 2018 sabbatical study of women's environmental leadership during the Flint water crisis. That sabbatical produced two solo-authored international conference papers on gender-environment communication, both of which were presented in June at the International Environmental Communication Association (IECA) conference in Vancouver. IECA is the largest and most prestigious professional organization in the world for environmental communication scholars. The papers that I recently presented at the IECA conference are now in preparation for journal submission. The project that I am overviewing here looks beyond the public personae of widely recognized environmental leaders studied in my previous work to lower-profile citizen-advocates volunteering with nonprofit environmental advocacy organizations.

Having placed this project within my larger research program, I turn to this research's prospective theoretical and methodological contributions. As foreshadowed above, this study will respond to important shortcomings in the literature. No previous work has used qualitative interviewing to study the role of gender in environmental communication. This is a meaningful limitation because such methods are uniquely suited to build theory through thick description, narrative explanation, and inclusivity of diverse voices of experience and identity (Horton, Hall, Gilbertz, & Peterson, 2017). Qualitative interviewing is invaluable for asking and answering "how," "what," and "why" research questions about environmental communication. The investigation that I am proposing will use in-depth qualitative interviews to address this gap.

Qualitative interviewing will allow me to delve into how nonprofit environmental organization volunteers (a) communicatively negotiate their environmentalist identities with their gender identities and

(b) make sense of the relationship between environmental advocacy and feminism. These two sets of intertwined categories, which focus on negotiating multiple identities and on the positioning of identities in relation to larger social systems, respectively, define the scope of this investigation. The first category pertains to how environmental advocates' voices verbally construct and negotiate their environmentalist and gender identities. That is, as they interact with each other and groups such as community members, family, and friends, how do interviewees negotiate their political and ethical commitment to the environment with their gender identities? The second, intertwined category concerns how environmental organization members communicatively frame their individual work, that of their advocacy organization, and that of the environmental movement in relation to feminist advocacy for gender equity. More generally, how do interviewees use communicative frames to affirm or disaffirm the relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equity? Also, if women hold a majority in environmentalism and nonprofit organizations are increasingly addressing gender-environment issues, to what extent, if any, do interviewees perceive changes in their own attitudes about gender relations?

Working across these two foci, I will complete this research in several steps. Initial steps include obtaining Institutional Review Board approval and recruiting interviewees from Midwestern U.S. nonprofit environmental advocacy organizations. Subsequent steps entail conducting, transcribing, and analyzing in-depth qualitative interviews completed with volunteers in nonprofit environmental advocacy organizations in the Midwestern United States. The interviews will be qualitative, in-depth, and semi-structured, with each lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes. Depending on when thematic saturation is achieved, the total number of interviews/interviewees will likely range from 20 to 40.

To obtain sufficient time to complete this considerable number of interviews and the related steps that I have listed, the course release time and Spring/Summer stipends featured in my project budget will be crucial. Given that recruited interviewees' location relative to SVSU may vary considerably, I expect to travel by car to some interviewees' preferred interview sites and to conduct other interviews by phone. For this reason, in addition to a digital voice recorder to be used for data collection, my budget includes a telephone recording attachment. Given the significant duration of each interview, I have also included in the budget an external computer hard drive for data storage. All interviews will be transcribed by an external transcriptionist service, as specified in the attached budget. In my experience, such services are expedient and cost-effective, and will foster my ability to complete this project in a timely fashion.

With the project's purpose, initial steps, and the required resources described, I shift briefly to the final steps of this research. These steps include writing academic papers informed by the interviews, presenting them at academic conferences, and publishing them in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Before submitting my papers for publication, I will first seek expert feedback by submitting completed papers to major conferences such as those of the International Environmental Communication Association, the National Communication Association, and the International Communication Association. Subsequently, these papers will be sent to peer-reviewed academic journals for publication. Examples of such journals include but are not limited to *Communication Monographs*, *Journal of Applied Communication*, *Environmental Communication*, and *Gender and Society*.

References

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Description of Benefits to Faculty, Community, and the University

The overarching benefit of the prospective project is that it demonstrates SVSU faculty's continuing commitment to working on cutting-edge problems to protect and advance the public interest. The worsening state of the environment as well as setbacks in the fight against gender-based problems such as sexual assault and human trafficking are two of the most important issues of our time. These issues affect educational institutions such as SVSU, public policymakers and government, nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, and local communities. Although it is not yet common public knowledge, the community of researchers of which I am part has established that the risks and threats that these problems pose are interconnected through communication. Gender-based issues and the environmental destruction both play out most dramatically at the local level but are part of global patterns. The proposed project will examine linkages between these issues and search for ways to inform nonprofit advocacy organizing at the local and global community levels.

This project's benefits to the university and the community extend to our most important audience: our students. When it comes to students' potential benefit, this research promises to inform my classroom pedagogy in meaningful ways. All of my courses at SVSU engage issues of primary interest in this research: issues of inclusivity, voice, and identity in communication, and how communication constitutes a struggle over values, ideologies, power, and the prospect of social change. My close study of actual environmental advocates' voices will undoubtedly ground and inform how I teach otherwise abstract ideas about how people's identities drive and are driven by their civic engagement. Moreover, in courses that I teach such as COMM 315: Persuasion and Attitude Change, COMM 365: Language, Thought, and Behavior in Civic Life, and COMM 490: Environmental Communication, students also learn about dynamics of social movements and campaigns that will be intimately explored in the proposed project. For instance, this study will benefit my COMM 365 classroom instruction on the public sphere as a space where citizens, increasingly organized through nonprofit organizations, deliberate about mutual interests. This research will specifically offer students insight on the co-articulation of multiple social movements and ideologies within the public sphere. It will also help me to animate how identities and difference enable and inhibit the practice of democracy in the public sphere.

Finally, in addition to informing these courses in these ways, this research will aid my instruction in COMM 105C: Argumentation, a general education course. Every semester, I teach at least one (often two) sections of COMM 105C. In this class, students learn the fundamentals about how to identify

and break down faulty reasoning and arguments, build strong arguments, and relay sound reasoning to audiences through speech and debate. A few years ago, I revised the course so that all speeches and debates that students perform directly connect to a class theme of sustainability and wellness. While the theoretical content remained unchanged, sites of application became more thematic, allowing for the accumulation of knowledge in a focused content area of societal importance and practical concern. Topics covered in application assignments range from the pros and cons of stem-cell research to the ethics of commercially sold bottled water. With the course theme intermeshing with my scholarly research, I have been able to more effectively work one-on-one with students as they conduct their research for debates and other assignments. Across several assignments, knowing all sides of the debate and being familiar with available library source materials has aided my instruction. I have found that, in return, students often use my guidance and obvious passion for the subject matter to make the issues their own. Some students explore these issues well beyond my expectations, ultimately educating me about the latest developments in the topic area.

Description of the Professional or Academic Work for Publication or Presentation

The proposed study will address significant gaps in the environmental communication literature. The most notable gap is the absence of qualitative interview accounts of how people actively involved in environmental advocacy make sense of the role of gender in environmentalism. The funding that this award provides will be used to better understand and address gender-based differences in environmental attitudes, values, and practices in the United States. Given the growing attention to gender-environment problems such as the unique and disproportionate risks that low-income women face due to climate change, this research is timely for theory as well as praxis.

I will use the Braun Fellowship to complete several steps of this timely work, with the most notable being the publication of original peer-reviewed research. Using my qualitative interview findings, I will first seek expert feedback by writing and presenting papers at major conferences in this area of research, such as those of the International Environmental Communication Association, the National Communication Association, and the International Communication Association. Subsequently, these papers will be sent to peer-reviewed academic journals for publication. Examples of high-quality journals that I may target include but are not limited to *Communication Monographs*, *Journal of Applied Communication*, *Environmental Communication*, and *Gender and Society*.

Description of Last Five Years of Teaching, Research, and Service, Demonstrating Past Performance and Contributions to the University

Teaching: In the past five years, my Instructor Course Evaluation (ICE) scores and qualitative comments, as well as other evidence such as the success of student mentees demonstrate my unwavering dedication to effective teaching. I have consistently received feedback that my courses are organized, challenging, and provide a highly positive climate where students find me approachable. My ICE scores have always averaged between 1 and 2, with 1 being the highest possible rating. Given that I consistently teach classes ranging from 100-level general education courses to advanced, senior-level courses and independent studies, I am proud of the positive feedback that I continue to receive. Some of the most meaningful feedback has come through faculty-student mentorships. A highlight of these mentorships came this past year when one of my mentees, an honors student advisee who had taken multiple courses with me, won the university-wide award for the top undergraduate honors thesis.

Research: Since 2014, I have been highly active in the area of research. In 2016, two coauthors and I started working on a scholarly book about how mythic storytelling has been used to unite the U.S. environmental movement with the sustainable food movement. Later, as the lead author, I worked with my colleagues to seek and secure a book contract with the University of Arkansas Press, a prestigious publishing house. In 2019, we completed the final revisions and have been notified that the book will be released in 2020.

In addition to completing this book during this time frame, I have had two solo-authored journal articles accepted for publication in top-tier international journals in the field of communication. I have also published (or have in press) four book chapters in edited scholarly volumes. Finally, during this period I have presented eight conference papers at international, national, and regional conferences within my discipline, and have two more accepted for this fall. Two of the presented conference papers were recognized with top paper awards, with the most recent one being from the National Communication Association, the flagship organization of the communication discipline in the US.

Service: In the area of service, I have consistently sought new and diverse opportunities to serve my discipline, the university, the College of Arts and Behavioral Sciences (ABS), and the Department of Communication. At the level of the discipline, I have served as a textbook reviewer and reviewed manuscripts for multiple academic journals in my field ranging from *Environmental Communication* to *Women's Studies in Communication*. At the university level, I was elected by my peers to a three-year term on the General Education Committee, as a faculty representative for Arts and Humanities. Our work has focused on responding to the recommendations of the recent Higher Learning Commission (HLC) review at SVSU, which has involved making considerable changes to the general education program. Additionally, within ABS, I was a Faculty Ambassador regarding the HLC report and a presenter in the ABS Scholarship Recognition Program. Lastly, in my department, I served for three years as faculty adviser for Lambda Pi Eta, our communication honor society chapter.

Budget

Year 1—2020:

1 course (3 credits) release time during the Winter and Fall 2020 semesters; \$750 per credit hr. + FICA (7.65%) for adjunct replacement per semester x 2 semesters	\$4,845
Digital voice recorder	\$110
Telephone recording device	\$30
External hard drive	\$55
Interview transcriptionist; external service; \$1.35 per transcribed interview minute X 90 minutes per interview = \$121.50 per interview X 15 interviews	\$1,822.50
Spring/Summer 2020 salary, including FICA and retirement (7% of time)	\$5,637.50
Year 1 Total	\$12,500

Year 2—2021:

1 course (3 credits) release time during the Winter and Fall 2021 semesters; \$750 per credit hr. + FICA (7.65%) for adjunct replacement per semester X 2 semesters	\$4,845
Interview transcriptionist; external service; \$1.35 per transcribed interview minute X 90 minutes per interview = \$121.50 per interview X 15 interviews	\$1,822.50
Spring/Summer 2021 salary, including FICA and retirement (7% of time)	\$5,832.50
Year 2 Total	\$12,500

Year 3—2022

1 course (3 credits) release time during the Winter and Fall 2022 semesters; \$750 per credit hr. + FICA (7.65%) for adjunct replacement per semester X 2 semesters	\$4,845
Spring/Summer 2022 salary, including FICA and retirement (6.25% of time)	\$5,155
International conference presentation travel	\$2,500
Year 3 Total	\$12,500

GRAND TOTAL AWARD AMOUNT	\$37,500
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