

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

EVERT VAN DE VLIERT, *Climate, Affluence, and Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 253 p., index.

Climate, Affluence, and Culture by Evert van de Vliert is an interesting account of human reactions to climate. The author focuses on the idea that people must use money to adapt to environmental challenges. A strong case is made that hot, cold, and temperate climates – mediated via collective economic resources – have a significant impact on culture. The book is an extension of Van de Vliert's earlier work in environmental psychology, which builds on the work of cross-cultural psychologists such as Geert Hofstede, Peter Smith and Harry Triandis.

Humans thrive in temperate climates partly because more resources are required to cope with extreme heat or cold, although there is a threat that overly temperate climates can become boring. As Van de Vliert points out, understanding the strategies different societies have evolved to cope with climates, especially when they dictate life or death, is an essential element of a proper conceptualization of culture. He uses a standard definition of culture, defined as our collective values and beliefs; as well as what we seek, avoid, and do. He pays close attention to the generational transmission of adaptive solutions. He notes that focusing too much on the genetic roots of culture (through such topics as the “selfish gene,” son-daughter preferences, and parental investment) is problematic because genetic survival is impossible without climatic survival.

The author outlines three central hypotheses. These are the context, impact, and niche hypotheses. Each hypothesis states that climate, culture, and economy are interrelated but arrives at this conclusion in different ways. The proponents of the context hypothesis emphasize the extent to which geographical conditions determine culture. They view each culture as a complex adaptation to numerous natural resources and constraints – including water and soil, latitude, elevation, flora and fauna, minerals, and the strategic importance of a society's physical location. Cause and effect are reversed in the impact hypothesis and the emphasis is on the extent to which culture determines climate. An investigation of the atmospheric impact of greenhouse gases might be consistent with this hypothesis. Lastly, the niche hypothesis “leaves open the question of whether climate and cash have independent or interdependent impacts on culture” (25). It is assumed that humans adapt to a single niche of interrelated species and contexts; culture is just one contributing factor to that niche.

The impact of climate on life satisfaction, through the investigation of happiness and suicide, is shown to illustrate the impact of cold, hot, and temperate climates on cultural development. Unfortunately, the discussion is brief but many sociologists would be interested in Van de Vliert's re-examination of Durkheim's

simplistic understanding of the influence of temperature on suicide rates. Van de Vliert also discusses survival, cooperativeness, work, and organizations by distinguishing among types of cultures: survival, self-expressive, and easygoing. At one extreme, survival cultures are likely to occur in regions where life is dangerous, a characteristic of harsh climates where people have little money. At the other extreme, self-expressive cultures are characterized by an emphasis on happiness, self-realization, and a concern with quality of life because physical and economic security can be taken for granted. Self-expressive cultures can be found even in inhospitable regions, if the inhabitants have the economic resources to cope with a difficult climate. Easygoing cultures are the midpoint between these two extremes. People in easygoing societies are: “free from the onerous task of achieving survival, free also from the onerous task of achieving self-expression” (117).

One of the main strengths of this book is Van de Vliert’s mastery of statistical data to develop his arguments. He uses data from a wide variety of sources: Ronald Inglehart’s work on World Values Surveys, the World Database of Happiness, and UNICEF. But Van de Vliert is critical of data sets which may provide inaccurate or superficial reports. For example, he criticizes the use of gross domestic product when investigating income per head because it does not take the informal economy into account. He thus obtains data from the World Bank to compensate for this limitation. Other attempts are made to replicate existing data, for example, data documenting cross-national differences in extrinsic work motives.

A second strength of this book is its innovative suggestions for policy development and global assistance. Van de Vliert emphasizes the interplay between climate and money when discussing current ethical issues. Child labour is usually viewed through an economic lens. Van de Vliert discounts this. He shows that child labour is more prevalent in nations with low to medium levels of development and which have extremely cold winters or hot summers. This suggests that the economic inability to cope with climate is the basis for the historical development of cultures with high rates of child labour. Climate, Affluence, and Culture has the power to change the way several major social issues are addressed. After reading this book, activists should have a more complex way of addressing child labour as a social problem rather than seeing it just as an issue of poverty and child neglect.

Certainly, the research presented in *Climate, Affluence, and Culture* is impressive. One detail which could be criticized is the author’s presentation of familial structures. Although Van de Vliert provides a thorough account of parental investment in raising children, it could be argued that he needs to incorporate a more inclusive picture of the structures through which these values are transmitted. He does discuss maternal and paternal joint investment in childrearing, noting that parental cooperation was invented partly to cope with climatic crises and to maintain the nuclear family. He also notes the impact of climate on male and female reproductive strategies and gender role equality. But he could have pushed this argument further if he had been more informative about the role of extended families in cultures operating in different climatic-economic niches. Familial structures operating outside the traditional nuclear

norm are surely relevant to investigations of survival, cooperation, and gender role divisions. Van de Vliert does write about extended familial members in his investigation of prosocial and unselfish behaviour; nonetheless, the extension which I have suggested is also relevant to his perspective on cooperative development and gender roles.

Climate, Affluence, and Culture is well written and organized in a very logical manner. Van de Vliert provides an excellent background about climate, money, and culture before he introduces the scenarios of work, survival, cooperation, and organization. This makes his argument clear and easy to follow. This book is a must read for upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, as well as faculty studying in the areas of development and climate. This volume is interdisciplinary in nature and may be useful to people working in many disciplines in the social sciences.

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