



# ***Poverty is No Excuse: A Look at the Psychology Behind Litter***

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## ***A Look at the Psychology Behind Litter***

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**Editor' Note:** This paper has been targeted for a broad audience. The level of scientific detail provided is therefore not as high as would be normally be required in technical paper subject to peer review by environment industry professionals. His paper was first published at Waste Management World.

Environmental education is becoming increasingly important as our lives, cities and priorities change. As our cities become more congested and busy, knowledge of the impact we each have on our surroundings becomes more and more crucial. Equally important however, is our understanding of how we can contribute to protecting the environment around us. We live in rapidly changing societies which are subject to profound changes, so why doesn't our environmental education transform to accommodate this?

In Latin America, there is very little concern expressed for disposing of waste appropriately in public. This attitude would be frowned upon in Europe, probably with the assumption that Europeans do not behave in this way because they are wealthier and therefore educated to a higher standard than their Latin American peers. But the assumption that lack of care for one's environment is due to poverty is false.

A social psychology experiment carried out by Stanford University in 1969 sought to explain the cause of varying behaviours between different socio-economic groups. The team of researchers conducted a field trial where two identical cars of the same model and same colour were left in different streets. One was left in the New York suburb of the Bronx, which was a deprived area, and one was left in a wealthy neighbourhood in California. Two identical cars abandoned in two neighborhoods with entirely different populations, and a team of specialists in social psychology studying the behavior of people at each site.

The car which was abandoned in New York began to be stripped of tyres, mirrors, and radios within a few hours of being left. All useful contents were extracted and the remains were destroyed. The car abandoned in California, however, remained intact.

Both left and right wing ideologies will frequently cite poverty as the cause of crime. But this experiment did not end here. After the car abandoned in the Bronx had been stripped and demolished and the one in California had remained intact for a week, the researchers smashed the glass window on the car of the latter.



What then happened was pretty much the same as in the Bronx: theft, violence and vandalism reduced the vehicle to the same state as the one in the slums. So why does broken glass in a car abandoned in a supposedly safe neighborhood trigger a similar criminal action? It is not poverty. It is obviously something to do with human psychology and social relations.

A broken window in an abandoned car conveys a sense of deterioration which appears to break our codes of coexistence, as if there were no publicly acceptable laws, rules and norms. A dirty city, too, creates the image that it is suffering from neglect by people or authorities. If a glass window of a building is broken and no one repairs it, soon all the others will be broken as well. If a community shows signs of deterioration and no one seems to care, then there will be crime. This is well documented as the 'broken windows theory' which states that visible crime and vandalism will lead to more.

If people commit 'petty offences' (such as illegal parking, speeding or going through red lights) and fail to be penalised, more serious offences and crimes will appear on the scene. An open-air dump is a true reflection of what I am talking about. It starts with a few bags of waste, then if they all do it, why not me?

But this is not a good enough excuse for our unkempt cities and our standards need to change, particularly if our population is to carry on expanding. Even if the governmental authorities do not impose restrictions, there is no need to demonstrate a poor environmental performance. I do not believe that punishments should be handed out to everyone; instead the individuals committing the offense should be brought to account.

It is difficult to discern however, who the individuals who are responsible for littering our cities are. Is it the person who throws a soft drinks can out of a window, or is it the person who sold it to him? Do the people who witness this behavior and do not react hold any responsibility or is it the politician who has not planned for enough street cleaners?

All of these possibilities need to be explored when designing a new, more flexible approach to environmental education. The impact of the individual needs to be explored when building up an awareness of our effect on our environment, and these changes need to be made soon.

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