Exploring Individual Experiences in Understanding Environmental Policies: A Phenomenological Approach to Urban Communities

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Abstract: Environmental policy has long been a central topic in sustainability studies, with a growing body of research emphasizing its social and psychological dimensions. However, much of the existing literature predominantly relies on quantitative measures to assess public attitudes, often overlooking the subjective experiences that shape individuals' perceptions of environmental policies. This research aims to address this gap by exploring how individuals interpret and make meaning of environmental policies in their everyday lives. Here, we adopt a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences and personal meanings attached to these policies. Through in-depth interviews with participants, we uncover the complex ways in which personal experiences, social norms, and cultural values influence people's perceptions and actions regarding environmental policies. Our findings reveal that subjective experiences, rather than mere awareness or factual knowledge, play a significant role in shaping environmental behavior. These results underscore the importance of considering personal narratives in environmental policy formulation and open new avenues for future research that explores the intersection of personal experience and policy acceptance.

Keywords: Environmental; Individual experiences; Urban communities

Introduction

The increasing urgency of waste management in urban areas has become a global concern, particularly in the context of rapid urbanization and population growth in major cities (Mathers & Brymer, 2022). As the volume of waste generated daily continues to rise, particularly in developing countries, local governments face significant challenges in implementing effective waste management policies (Ates & Polat, 2025). However, the success of such policies is not solely determined by their technical and regulatory frameworks but also by the public's perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral responses toward waste management initiatives (Rowlands et al., 2022). Understanding how communities interpret and engage with these policies is crucial, as social, cultural, and economic factors often shape individual and collective attitudes toward waste management. Despite policy interventions aimed at fostering environmental awareness and responsible waste disposal, there remains a gap between policy implementation and public engagement, leading to suboptimal outcomes in many urban settings.

A critical aspect of this issue is the role of individual experiences in shaping perceptions of waste management policies (Noble et al., 2019). While policy

evaluations often rely on statistical analyses and large-scale surveys, these quantitative approaches fail to capture the deeper, subjective dimensions of public engagement (Serrano-Fuentes et al., 2024). Communities' direct experiences with waste management-ranging from perceived policy effectiveness to individual and collective responsibilities for urban cleanliness—remain largely underexplored (Schwartz & Mazareeb, 2023). In many cases, residents feel disconnected from the decision-making processes or lack awareness of the intended objectives behind waste management regulations (Shah et al., 2015). Consequently, there is an increasing need to explore the ways in which individuals construct meaning around waste management policies and how these meanings influence their engagement with environmental sustainability initiatives.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach provides a robust framework for examining how individuals experience, interpret, and interact with waste management policies in their daily lives. Unlike traditional policy assessments that focus on measurable outcomes, phenomenology seeks to uncover the lived experiences that underpin public perceptions and behaviors. By examining subjective meanings, this approach reveals the intricate interplay between emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of waste management. Such an understanding is essential for developing more inclusive and effective policy frameworks that align with the lived realities of urban communities.

The study of subjective experiences in waste management policies has gained increasing attention in social and environmental research. Previous studies have largely emphasized the technical and regulatory aspects of waste management, focusing on policy efficiency, compliance rates, and waste reduction strategies (Bennett et al., 2016). While these studies provide valuable insights into policy effectiveness, they often overlook the lived experiences and nuanced perceptions of the communities directly affected by these regulations (Westover, 2012). The phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on individual meaning-making, offers a complementary perspective that enriches our understanding of how communities navigate and internalize waste management policies.

Despite the relevance of this perspective, methodological limitations persist in previous studies. A predominant reliance on quantitative methodologies—such as structured surveys and statistical modeling—has led to a fragmented understanding of public engagement with waste management policies. These methods, while useful for capturing general trends, often fail to account for the depth and complexity of human experiences, emotions, and perceptions. As a result, critical aspects of why certain policies succeed or fail remain inadequately addressed.

Moreover, research on waste management policies often adopts a top-down approach, assessing policy effectiveness from an institutional or governmental perspective rather than from the lived experiences of citizens (Hughes, 2014). This approach risks overlooking the socio-cultural dimensions of waste management, including public trust in governmental interventions, the role of social norms in shaping waste disposal behaviors, and the perceived fairness and accessibility of policy measures. Without integrating these subjective dimensions, policy interventions may struggle to achieve meaningful behavioral change and community participation.

Given these gaps, adopting a phenomenological perspective becomes imperative. By prioritizing the voices and experiences of urban residents, this study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of waste management dynamics. The phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals engage with, interpret, and respond to waste management policies, offering a richer and more contextually grounded analysis.

While numerous studies have examined waste management policies, most have focused on quantitative assessments of policy effectiveness, public awareness, and compliance levels. These studies have provided important insights but have largely neglected the deeper subjective experiences that shape public engagement with environmental policies (Vugteveen et al., 2015). Theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior have been instrumental in explaining pro-environmental actions but have not sufficiently addressed the role of lived experiences in shaping waste management behaviors (Schweizer et al., 2025). By applying a phenomenological lens, this study bridges this gap by investigating the experiential dimensions of waste management policies from the perspectives of those directly affected.

To achieve this, the study employs a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews with urban residents. Through this methodology, it explores the complex interplay of emotions, social norms, and cultural influences in shaping individuals' attitudes toward waste management policies. The thematic analysis of these narratives will generate key insights into how public perceptions of waste management policies are formed, sustained, and potentially transformed.

By centering on the subjective experiences of individuals, this study contributes to a more nuanced

understanding of waste management policies. It underscores the importance of integrating phenomenological insights into environmental policy research, advocating for approaches that not only measure policy outcomes but also engage with the lived realities of the communities they seek to serve.

Method

Study Design

The phenomenological approach was employed as the research design for this study to explore the subjective experiences and meanings attributed by participants to the phenomenon of waste management in urban areas. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to uncover the essence of human experiences in everyday life and how individuals assign meaning to their experiences (Workman-Stark, 2021). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of public perceptions, understanding, and attitudes toward waste management policies, focusing on how they experience these policies within their social and cultural contexts. In this study, descriptive phenomenology was applied, aiming to describe participants' direct experiences without providing deeper interpretation or analysis of the meanings embedded in those experiences.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling approach, with inclusion criteria encompassing individuals aged between 18 and 60 years, residing in the urban area under study, and having direct experience with local waste management policies. Exclusion criteria included those not directly involved in waste management activities or those living in non-urban areas (Zhang & Yan, 2023). A total of 20 participants were involved in the study, consisting of 10 males and 10 females, with an average age of 35 years. These demographic characteristics provide relevant context for understanding diverse perspectives on waste management policies, considering that differences in gender and age may influence their experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted directly with participants. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore participants' experiences, understanding, and perceptions regarding waste management policies (Bratianu et al., 2016; Gutema et al., 2024; Lopez-Class et al., 2012). Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a location comfortable for the participants, such as their homes or workplaces, to ensure openness and ease in communication. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and interview transcripts were used for further analysis. The interview protocol was based on previously validated guidelines from similar phenomenological studies, with minor adjustments made to suit the local context.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, which involved identifying key themes emerging from the interview transcripts. The analytical steps began with reading the entire dataset to understand the general meanings embedded in participants' experiences (Huong et al., 2012). The data were then divided into smaller units, which were subsequently grouped based on key themes relevant to the research questions. The analysis was conducted iteratively, with continuous reference to the raw data to ensure accuracy in theme coding. The entire process was carried out using NVivo software to assist in theme categorization and coding. Through this analysis, essential themes were identified, providing insights into how the public perceives waste management policies and the challenges they encounter in implementing them.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Public Perceptions of Waste Management Policies

Urban communities in the studied area exhibit diverse perceptions regarding the waste management policies implemented by the local government. While most respondents recognize the importance of these policies, concerns remain regarding their effectiveness. One participant, Wati, a housewife, stated:

"We actually understand the importance of waste management, but sometimes we feel confused because there are no clear guidelines from the government on how we should properly separate waste. Sometimes, waste is not collected by the authorities because of incorrect sorting. This makes us hesitant to participate more actively."
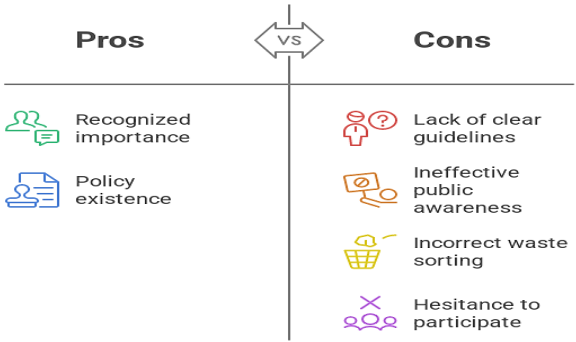

Pros vs **Cons**

Pros:
- Recognized importance
- Policy existence

Cons:
- Lack of clear guidelines
- Ineffective public awareness
- Incorrect waste sorting
- Hesitance to participate

Figure 1. Waste management policies

This perception indicates a degree of confusion among the public regarding policy implementation, despite their awareness of waste management's significance. This sentiment is echoed in an interview with another respondent, Andi, a private-sector worker:

"I agree with this policy, but I think the public awareness campaigns are lacking. Many people do not know that plastic waste and organic waste should be separated, which makes the policy ineffective."
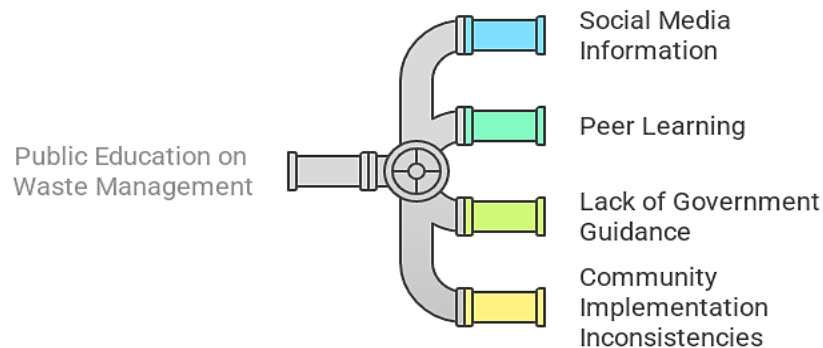
Theme 2: The Role of Public Awareness Campaigns and Education in Policy Acceptance

One of the key themes that emerged from this study is the importance of public awareness campaigns and education in enhancing public acceptance of waste management policies. Some respondents indicated that

they only received information about these policies through social media or from their neighbors. Asep, a student, shared his experience:

"I learned about waste sorting policies from my friends at school, but at home, we were not given clear instructions from the government or sanitation officers. So, sometimes we just follow what we see around us."

These findings suggest that despite the presence of policies, the lack of a systematic and comprehensive public education effort by the authorities remains a significant barrier to policy acceptance. The absence of standardized waste management education has resulted in inconsistencies in how communities implement waste separation practices.
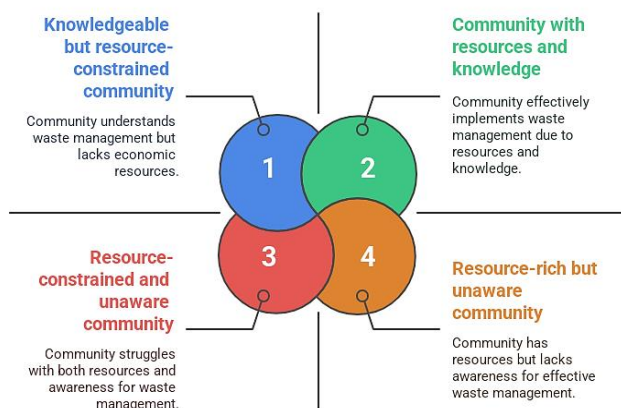

Figure 2. Pathways to Effective Waste Management Education

Theme 3: Social and Economic Barriers to Policy Implementation

Several respondents stated that social and economic barriers play a crucial role in their level of participation in waste management policies. For example, one respondent, Ibu Nia, who lives in a densely populated area.

Figure 3. Socioeconomic Influence on Waste Management Participation

"We want to manage our waste properly, but many families here struggle to provide separate bins for plastic and organic waste. Sometimes, economic difficulties make us prioritize basic needs over waste management."

This statement illustrates that while awareness of proper waste management exists, social and economic conditions influence individuals' or families' ability to comply with waste management policies. These findings highlight that effective waste management policies must take socioeconomic factors into account, particularly in urban areas with higher poverty rates.

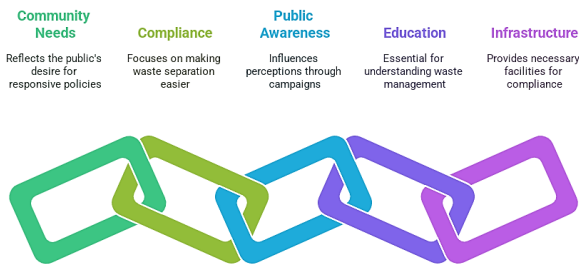*Theme 4: Expectations for Improved Waste Management Policies*

Most respondents expressed their desire for waste management policies to be more responsive to community needs and to make compliance easier. One respondent, Budi, a farmer living on the outskirts of the city, stated:

"We hope the government can provide adequate facilities to make waste separation easier, such as dedicated waste bins in every household or public area."

Additionally, there should be clearer guidelines on how to separate waste so we don't get confused."

This statement reflects a strong demand for policies that are more accessible and easier to understand for the public. Respondents seek practical solutions that can be directly implemented in their daily lives.

Figure 4. Enhancing Urban Waste Management

The main findings of this study indicate that public perceptions of urban waste management policies are significantly influenced by their level of understanding, the public awareness campaigns they receive, and existing social and economic challenges. While the public generally agrees with these policies, their successful implementation heavily depends on the government's ability to enhance public awareness, education, and the provision of necessary infrastructure to facilitate better compliance

Discussion

This study found that individual experiences in the context of waste management are more influenced by personal perceptions of existing policies and their impact on daily life rather than by general knowledge or attitudes toward cleanliness (Raguseo et al., 2015). The public tends to internalize these policies according to the meaning they assign within their social and cultural contexts. These findings provide deeper insight into how waste management policies are either accepted or disregarded, depending on how individuals experience them in their daily lives—an essential factor for the success of such policies.

These findings answer the research question on how waste management policies are understood and accepted by the public. Specifically, the results indicate that subjective experiences regarding these policies are shaped not only by cognitive understanding but also by deeper emotional and social experiences (Xu et al., 2024). This study reveals the importance of social elements in influencing individual decisions to adopt waste management policies, enriching our understanding of this phenomenon. Uniquely, this research confirms that seemingly straightforward policies can have various interpretations and meanings that are heavily influenced

by local contexts, a factor often overlooked in previous studies.

The public perceptions of environmental policies are often shaped by personal experiences and subjective interpretations, rather than solely by knowledge or awareness of the issue (Aggarwal & Sriram, 2018). That study highlighted that psychological and social factors play a significant role in how environmental policies are understood and accepted by the public. While many previous studies emphasized the importance of knowledge about environmental issues as a key determinant of behavior, this study underscores that subjective experiences, including personal values and daily life experiences, are far more influential in policy acceptance. This leads to the conclusion that a more personal and holistic approach is necessary to understand the dynamics of environmental policy acceptance within society.

However, the research approach in this study differs from quantitative studies, which generally rely on measuring attitudes or knowledge through surveys or other statistical instruments. Quantitative research often focuses on collecting generalizable data, analyzing the relationships between measured variables such as knowledge or attitudes toward policy (Duggan et al., 2024). In contrast, the phenomenological approach used in this study provides a deeper understanding of participants' personal experiences, exploring how they interpret and feel about these policies in their daily lives. This study emphasizes the importance of personal and social contexts, as well as how individuals internalize policies within their cultural framework and social values.

These findings align with Ajzen's theory of Pro-Environmental Behavior, which explains that human behavior is influenced by attitudes, social norms, and individual intentions. In the context of waste management, this study demonstrates that these factors do not only shape attitudes but also create deep personal meanings associated with the policy (Allan et al., 2013). For instance, an individual's attitude toward waste management policies may be influenced by prevailing social norms in their community, such as long-standing cleanliness practices. Therefore, even when a policy has clear and data-driven objectives, the meaning that individuals assign to it is significantly shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds.

This study also highlights that personal experiences, such as prior interactions with similar policies or emotional experiences related to waste management, can reinforce or alter attitudes toward a policy. This finding emphasizes that even though environmental policies are designed based on scientific knowledge and statistical data, they are ultimately

shaped by unique individual experiences (Ding et al., 2023). Thus, understanding environmental policies from a subjective experiential perspective becomes crucial in designing policies that are more effective and widely accepted by the public. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to explore the deeper meaning of individual experiences, providing insights that cannot be achieved through quantitative methods alone.

Furthermore, these findings expand our understanding of how environmental policies are internalized by the public. Policies are often perceived as mere instructions or rules to follow, without considering how communities experience them (Nutley, 2007). This study reminds us that subjective experiences within broader social and cultural contexts play a vital role in shaping individual perspectives and behaviors. For example, in communities with strong cleanliness habits or values that support environmental sustainability, waste management policies may be more readily accepted. In contrast, in other areas, the same policies might receive less attention or even be ignored.

These findings also contribute to the development of environmental behavior theories, highlighting the importance of social and emotional elements in determining responses to policy (Winstanley et al., 2002). While Ajzen's Theory of Pro-Environmental Behavior considers factors such as attitudes and social norms, this study demonstrates that personal life experiences which are not always reflected in knowledge or formal attitudes also play a crucial role in how environmental policies are accepted. Thus, the phenomenological approach, which prioritizes subjective experiences, can be a valuable tool for gaining a more holistic understanding of how environmental policies are perceived and internalized by society.

The findings of this study suggest that perceptions of environmental policies are primarily shaped by individuals' subjective experiences, rather than merely their knowledge of the issue (McClain et al., 2024). This implies that environmental policies should take into account social norms, personal values, and lived experiences, rather than relying solely on information dissemination or environmental education. A participatory approach, which acknowledges the role of personal experiences and social norms, may enhance public acceptance of these policies.

However, the methodological limitation of phenomenology, which focuses on individual experiences within specific contexts, restricts the generalizability of these findings (Pignocchino et al., 2023). This study was conducted with a limited group, meaning that its results need to be tested in broader contexts or communities to ensure their relevance across different social and cultural backgrounds.

This study opens avenues for further exploration of how emotional and social experiences influence public policies, not only in environmental contexts but also in social and educational policies (Hickie et al., 2019). Future research could expand our understanding of how different social groups or past experiences shape attitudes toward policies. These findings can thus aid in the development of more responsive policies that align with public needs and values, while also enriching phenomenological studies in public policy research.

Conclusion

This study examines how individuals' subjective experiences influence their perceptions of environmental policies, with a focus on the personal and social factors that shape their decisions. The key findings indicate that life experiences, social norms, and personal values have a greater impact than mere knowledge or information received about the policies. This enhances the understanding of pro-environmental behavior theory by highlighting the importance of subjective dimensions in shaping public behavior. Consequently, this study contributes to the development of more inclusive and participatory policies. Additionally, this study emphasizes the need for further research to explore how other factors, such as cultural background or specific social groups, influence responses to environmental policies. A key recommendation for future research is to expand the study's scope across different communities to gain a deeper understanding of the variations in experiences and perceptions related to environmental policies.

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