

Highway from hell!: A case study on psychosocial impact monitoring.

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To overcome the reductionist and social-economic flavored practices still popular in social impact assessment (e.g., costs-benefits analysis), a case is being made in defense of a larger role for psychology. Following this philosophy, a case study on the *psychosocial monitoring of the construction stage of a section of the Portugal South Highway* (the second most important in the country) will be presented.

Subsequent to some public consultation data analysis, a questionnaire was designed aiming to assess: the major annoyance sources from the highway construction; physical and psychological health disturbances caused by the construction; and psychosocial processes that feature in environmental stress models (e.g., Palma-Oliveira, 1992), such as attitudes, risk perception and coping, for these variables are of great value when it comes to making sense of the way people behave and are affected, when faced with an event perceived as threatening.

The survey was conducted with three groups of local inhabitants: the first one referred to local inhabitants labeled P1 (priority 1), located less than 50 meters from the construction site and with no natural or artificial barriers between the objective annoyance sources and their homes. More significantly negative impacts were predicted for this group when compared to another one whose homes were located further than 50 meters from the construction site or closer but with barriers protecting them from the impacts. This latter group was divided into those that would have an access to the highway, once the construction was finished (P3), and those that, not having an access in their residence area, would never be able to enjoy the advantages of inhabiting near the highway (P2).

Results showed that P1 individuals responded in a significantly more negative way (e.g., anxiety, pessimistic expectations towards the future) than P2, and that these, in turn, responded in a more worrisome way than P3. These results are easily accommodated by the environmental stress and cognitive adaptation (e.g., Taylor, 1983) models, according to which P1 individuals were in a more stressful situation than P2 and P3, while not possessing the same coping resources that these did; P3, in particular, were not only less subject to the construction hassles, but also more able to see some good in the situation, appraising the event as advantageous as it would come to allow them better commuting options. Had we ignored the psychological dimension and relied upon mere costs-benefits analysis we would have never understood why something that is pure hell for some, isn't all together bad for others.

Key words: environmental stress; survey research; psychosocial impacts; coping

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