

Fairness and the Human Right to Water: A Preliminary Cross-cultural Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, a global consensus emerged around the idea of water as a fundamental human right. The United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment 15 requires national governments to make progress toward providing “sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water” for all citizens. However, political realities make these objectives difficult to complete, and require governments to balance various competing interests. These considerations speak to a key tension in current global debates around the human right to water: how do we determine what is fair? Specifically: what should people’s entitlements and expectations be with regard to water access and availability?

Our challenge in this study is to develop a preliminary cross-cultural theory of conceptions of fairness around the right to water. We use an innovative process of theme and meta-theme analysis to examine, contrast, and integrate local beliefs in this domain using interview data collected in four ecologically and culturally different sites – squatter settlements in the Bolivian highlands, an indigenous coastal Fijian village, urban and rural communities in central New Zealand, and a desert city in the southwestern United States.

To develop such an elemental theory, our analysis of people’s ideas in these varied places focuses on three key questions:

- 1) How are conceptions of fairness in water grounded in local cultures, ecologies, and governance systems?
- 2) What general factors or conditions might best explain variation in ideas around specific dimensions of fairness in water distribution?
- 3) Are there general principles of water distribution that people understand as fundamentally fair or unfair cross-culturally?

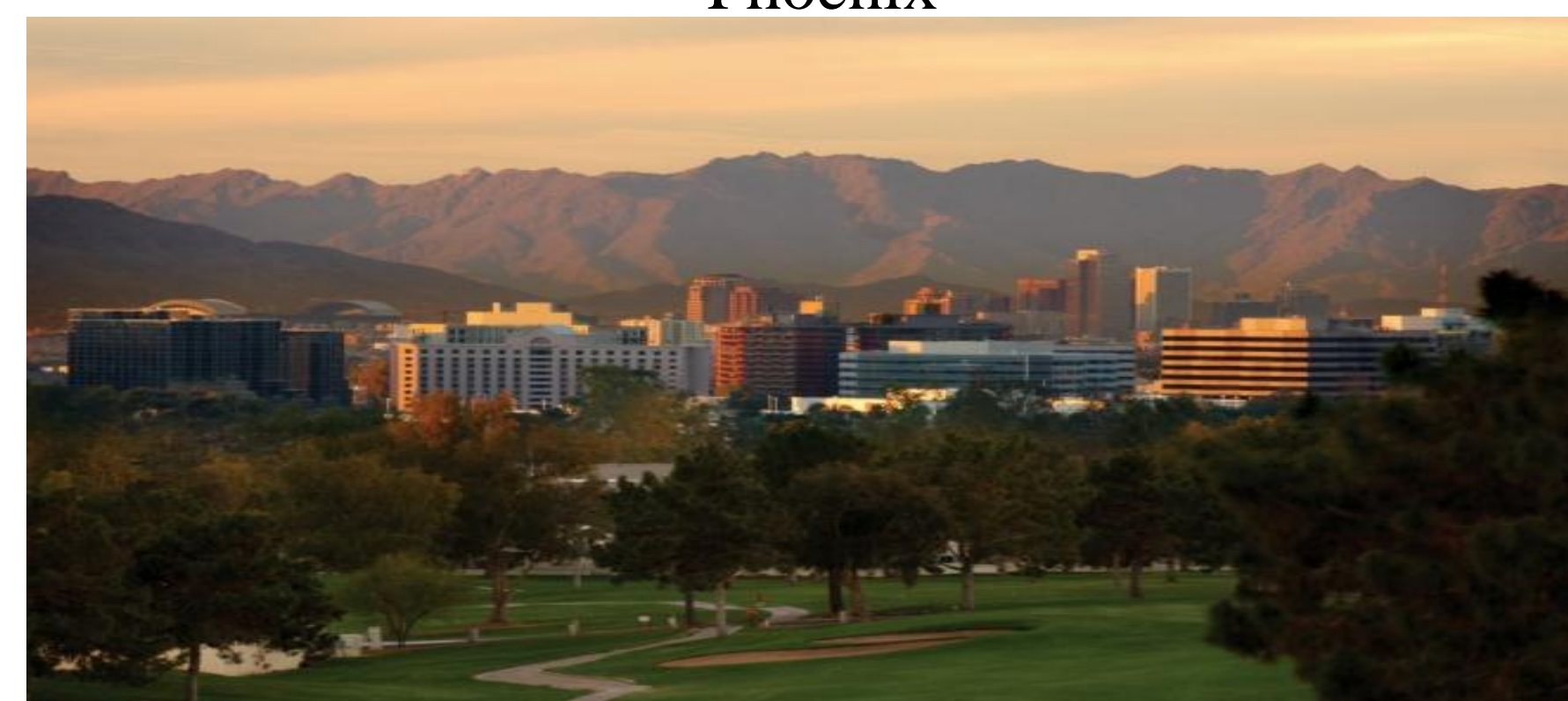
Water-rich

New Zealand

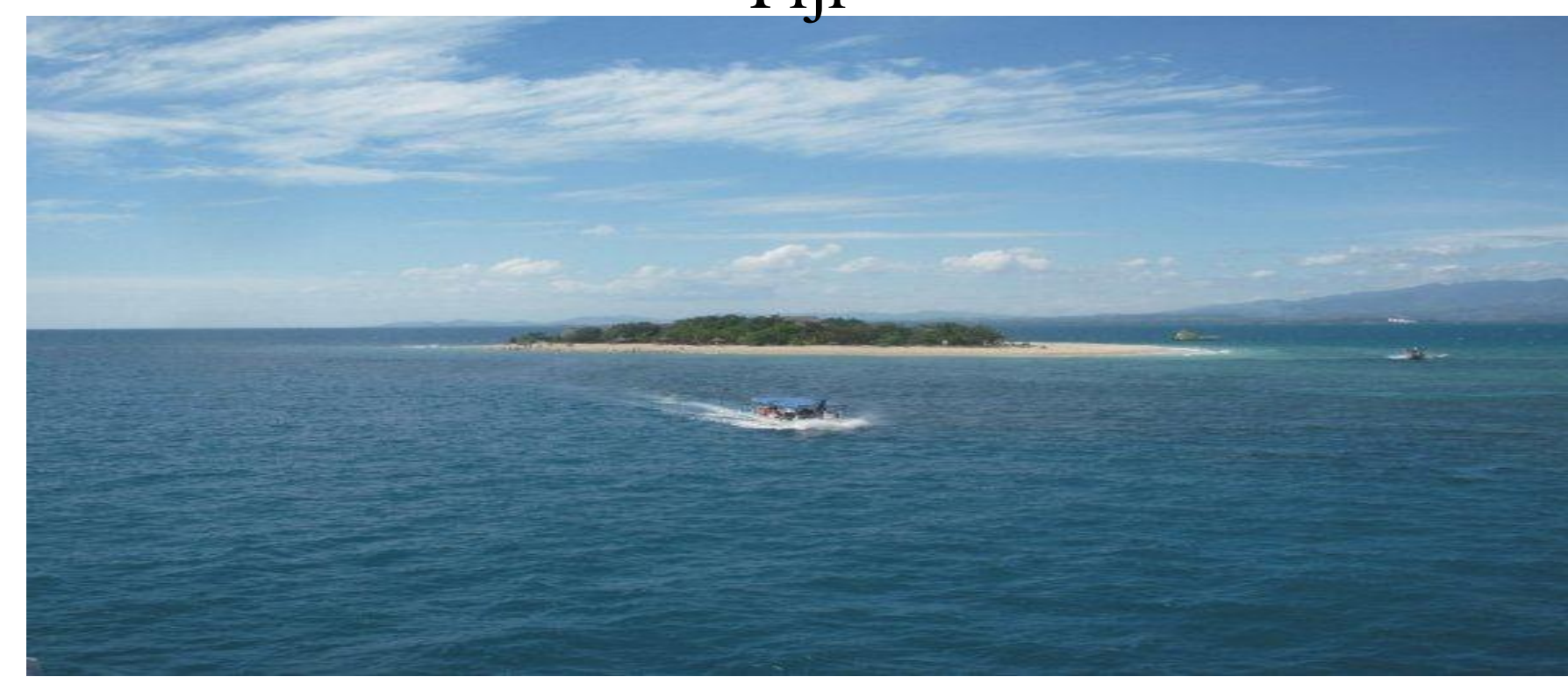


Water-scarce

Phoenix



Fiji



Bolivia



Developed

Developing

METHODS

The interview data that form the basis for our analysis were collected as one component of the Global Ethnohydrology Study, a multi-year, multi-sited study examining comparative cultural knowledge of water. Interviews regarding notions of fairness in water institutions were collected with 219 adults in four countries in 2007-2008. The specific countries and study locations were selected to facilitate two-way comparisons on both economic development (developing sites=Bolivia, Fiji; developed sites=New Zealand, United States) and water availability (semi/arid sites=Bolivia, United States; water-rich sites=Fiji, New Zealand). The results were analyzed using a two-stage method for analyzing themes and metathemes. First, the theme analysis is designed to examine inductively how fairness in water availability is conceptualized at a local level in Bolivia, Fiji, New Zealand, and the U.S. Second, the metatheme analysis is designed to identify conceptualizations of fairness in water availability that are shared cross-culturally and to examine differences in how these ideas are expressed in Bolivia, Fiji, New Zealand, and the U.S.

RESULTS

New Zealand		Phoenix	
Theme	Respondents reporting (%)	Theme	Respondents reporting (%)
Everyone has access to water	28.9	Differential allotment/distribution	16.7
Easy access to water	28.4	Water pricing	15.0
Ample water	27.2	Water restrictions	11.7

Fiji		Bolivia	
Theme	Respondents reporting (%)	Theme	Respondents reporting (%)
Improved infrastructure	32.4	Unreliable water vendors	46.3
Inadequacy of past water system	18.9	Water scarcity	41.5
Everyone has access to water	18.9	Water is essential	17.0

Table 1: Top three most frequently mentioned themes in New Zealand, Phoenix, Fiji, and Bolivia

Metatheme	New Zealand	Phoenix	Fiji	Bolivia	
Water access	76.5	36.7	56.8	63.4	Consistent fairness concerns
Water quantity	30.9	38.3	13.5	53.7	
Equality and equity	37.0	40.0	10.8	17.1	
Government	23.5	23.3	27.0	26.8	
Infrastructure	17.3	5.0	45.9	7.3	Concerns vary according to local context
Water cost	29.6	20.0	2.7	7.3	
Water quality	19.8	1.7	8.1	7.3	
Water rights	9.9	23.3	8.1	19.5	
Water source	39.5	10.0	10.8	7.3	

Table 2: Percentage of respondents reporting nine metathemes in New Zealand, Phoenix, Fiji, and Bolivia

DISCUSSION

The central themes identified in each fieldsite resonate with local ecological, economic, and political situations, such as water scarcity in Bolivia, collective action and fair water access in Fiji, easy and abundant water access in New Zealand, and water access, pricing issues, and loose restrictions in the southwestern U.S. Based on the meta-theme analysis we find that four key domains – water access, water quantity, equity/equality, and the role of government– around which there is consistent fairness concern. By contrast, water quality, water cost, water source, water rights and infrastructure turn out to be only relevant to people in some sites. The distinction between water-rich and water-scarce sites and wealthier versus poorer economies seems to provide much of the contextual explanation of this variation. Our analysis critically shows that, where water is plentiful and highly affordable, we may expect little or no discord around issues of fairness. And, as scarcity and costs rise, we would predict that discord around key notions of fairness will increase.

Importantly, our findings can be directly related to the global movement toward defining water as a human right, and show that there are shared concerns that are not well developed or represented in current international agreements. In terms of building a more sophisticated theory of fairness related to the human right to water, we need to develop and test core hypotheses around why notions of fairness might vary from place to place. If the differences prove to be mostly tied to ecological factors (e.g., water-poor or water-rich), such as we observed in the patterns of concern over water rights in this analysis, rather than – say – sociocultural factors (e.g., collectivistic or individualistic cultural beliefs), then this has implications for how we can conceptualize and implement the human right to water in a meaningful and sustainable way.