



Young people's responses to environmental issues: Exploring the roles of adaptability and personality [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 January 2015

Received in revised form 30 January 2015

Accepted 2 February 2015

Available online 18 February 2015

Keywords:

Environment

Climate change

Adaptability

Personality trait

ABSTRACT

Based on a sample of over 2000 Australian adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.5$ years; 51% girls), this investigation explores the extent to which young people's adaptability and personality are associated with their responses to environmental issues. Controlling for the effects of socio-demographic and prior achievement, structural equation modeling showed that adaptability yielded significant positive direct, indirect (via environmental awareness and concerns), and total effects on pro-environmental attitudes. Although agreeableness and neuroticism also generated significant and positive total effects on pro-environmental attitudes, adaptability explained the most variance in pro-environmental attitudes. Findings offer theoretical, research, and applied implications for researchers and practitioners seeking to optimize individuals' responses to environmental challenges.

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1. Introduction

Young people's concerns and attitudes about the environment are considered crucial determinants of how well current and future generations will adapt in constructively mitigating environmental challenges (OECD, 2009). However, there has been little research looking into adaptability as relevant to environmental challenges and how a capacity to adapt might influence these processes in adolescents. Accordingly, the present investigation examines the extent to which adaptability plays a role in predicting young people's orientations to environmental issues (environmental awareness, concerns, appraisals, and attitudes toward pro-environmental behaviors). The study also investigates the predictive role of personality (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience) that has been found to influence environmental attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Hirsh, 2010), and is thus important to disentangle from predictive variance attributable to adaptability.

1.1. Adaptability and environmental threats

Guided by a framework of adaptation to climate change proposed by the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface between Psychology and Global Climate Change (APATFIPGCC, 2009; Reser & Swim, 2011), this research tests the role of adaptability and personality traits as predictors of psychosocial factors relevant to environmental issues. As shown in Fig. 1, adaptability and personality traits are posited to have direct predictive effects on awareness, concerns, and future expectations (or appraisals) about environmental issues and also direct and indirect effects on pro-environmental attitudes. The framework adopts the definition of adaptation by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007, p. 869), "adjustment in natural and human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities." It posits that individuals view direct experiences of and indirect exposures (through media and social interactions) to environmental stressors as perceived environmental threats that give rise to cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses and motivational processes to adapt to and cope with the anticipated impacts.

Plausible adaptive responses to environmental stressors, according to the framework (Reser & Swim, 2011), include actively seeking information about the catalysts and consequences of environmental threats (behavioral proactiveness), assessing the risks and severity of present and future impacts of the threats (cognitive appraisal), growing concerns about the environmental situations and conditions under threats (affective

[☆] The authors would like to thank the Australian Research Council for funding this research. Thanks are also extended to Brad Papworth, Harry Nejad, Farideh Nejad, and Marianne Mansour for data collection and data entry, the Australian Research Council for funding, and participating schools and students.

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reaction) and then developing attitudes toward the mitigation of the impacts of the environmental threats (pro-environmental attitudes). Further, the adaptation to environmental challenges is posited to vary according to personality dispositions (e.g., anxiety, optimism). Informed by this framework, therefore, the present study seeks to investigate the role of adaptability – alongside personality traits – as key predictors of environmental issues-related psychosocial attributes.

1.2. Adaptability: the concept and its relevance to environmental issues

The American Psychological Association defines adaptability as “the capacity to make appropriate responses to changed or changing situations; the ability to modify or adjust one’s behavior in meeting different circumstances or different people” (VandenBos, 2007, p. 17). Recent research has expanded this concept and developed a measure of adaptability that considers not only individuals’ behavioral adjustment but also cognitive and affective functioning in response to changing, uncertain, and novel circumstances, conditions, and situations (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, & Liem, 2013). Adaptability thus aligns with the cognitive, behavioral and emotional responses to environmental problems outlined earlier (APATFIPGCC, 2009; Reser & Swim, 2011).

Martin et al. (2013) maintain that cognitive adjustment represents modifications in thinking to deal with new and uncertain demands; behavioral adjustment refers to modifications in the nature, level, and degree of behavior to deal with new and uncertain situations and conditions; and affective adjustment is considered in terms of emotional modulation to respond to situational uncertainty and novelty. Martin et al. (2013) showed the distinction between adaptability and cognate constructs (self-regulation, resilience, coping) and the relative salience of adaptability in predicting academic (e.g., class participation) and psychosocial (e.g., life satisfaction) functioning beyond the effects of these cognate constructs. Hence, there are empirical grounds for researchers

and practitioners to focus on individuals’ capacity to adapt to environmental issues.

Although there has apparently been no research that has examined the role of adaptability in responding to environmental issues, adaptability may be associated with specific responses related to environmental issues. In view of the framework described earlier (Reser & Swim, 2011) and the nature of adaptability (VandenBos, 2007), it is possible that adaptability is associated with individuals’ tendency to seek information about causes and consequences of environmental issues, be concerned about environmental issues, and develop attitudes toward behaviors that may address these issues and their concerns (see Fig. 1). This study seeks to examine this.

1.3. Personality traits and environmental issues

The relationships between the five ‘classic’ personality traits and responses to environmental issues have recently received growing research attention. Hirsh (2010), for example, showed that environmental concerns were positively predicted by agreeableness, openness, neuroticism and conscientiousness. Similarly, Wiseman and Bogner (2003) revealed that neuroticism was associated with an inclination to conserve the environment. Hirsh and Dolderman (2007) found that pro-environmentalism was positively predicted by agreeableness and openness, whereas consumerism was negatively predicted by agreeableness. Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, Snelgar, and Furnham (2011) found that higher conscientiousness was linked to likelihood to engage in waste management behaviors such as recycling, reusing, and reducing wastage. Similarly, Boeve-de Pauw, Donche, and Van Petegem (2011) found that Flemish adolescents’ concentration – a component of conscientiousness – positively predicted ecocentric worldviews, whereas egocentrism – a negative indicator of agreeableness – negatively predicted ecocentric worldviews. Taken together, these findings suggest the role of personality traits in individuals’ orientations to environmental issues.

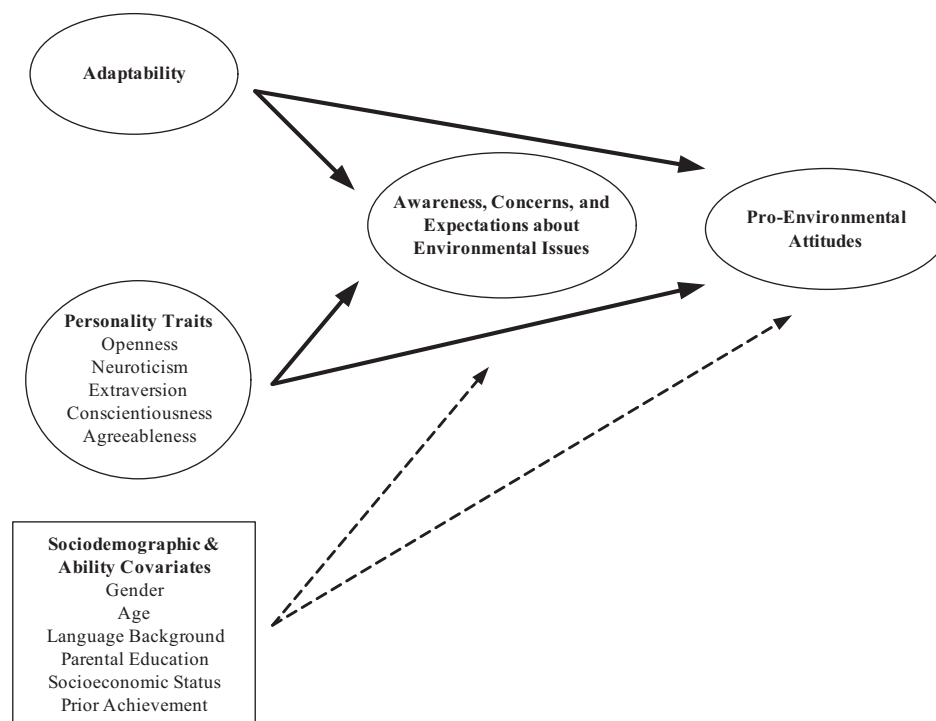


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of adaptability, personality traits, awareness, concerns, future expectations about environmental issues, and pro-environmental attitudes. *Note:* Dashed paths represent paths from covariates.

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