



# It is a moral issue: The relationship between environmental self-identity, obligation-based intrinsic motivation and pro-environmental behaviour

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## ABSTRACT

In order to effectively mitigate climate change, people need to adopt environmentally-friendly actions. We argue that some people act in an environmentally-friendly manner without external incentives to do so, but rather because they are intrinsically motivated to do so. There is some initial evidence to suggest that this is particularly likely for people with a strong environmental self-identity. However, not much is known about how environmental self-identity influences pro-environmental actions. In this research, we aimed to test whether, and if so, via which process environmental self-identity is related to environmentally-friendly behaviour. We conducted three studies to test our hypotheses. In the first study, our hypotheses were confirmed in a sample of the general population using a correlational design. In the second study, we replicated our findings with a different indicator of moral obligation and with a different dependent variable. In the third study, we tested our model in an experimental design. Again, we found support for our hypotheses that environmental self-identity is related to one's obligation-based intrinsic motivation (that is, feelings of moral obligation) to act pro-environmentally, which in turn affects pro-environmental actions. As expected, the obligation-based intrinsic motivation mediates the relationship between environmental self-identity and environmentally-friendly behaviour. Our findings suggest that strengthening environmental self-identity may be a cost-effective way to promote pro-environmental actions, as people with a strong environmental self-identity are likely to act in an environmentally-friendly manner without an external incentive to do so.

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In order to effectively mitigate climate change, people need to adopt environmentally-friendly actions (IPCC, 2007). Policy makers often try to promote environmentally-friendly behaviour by providing external incentives as to make the pro-environmental behaviour more attractive or to make the environmentally-unfriendly behaviour less attractive. But are such external incentives always needed? Research suggests that some people act in an environmentally-friendly manner even though it is not extrinsically rewarding, and that some people act pro-environmentally in spite of it being costly or effortful (e.g., Steg et al., 2012). These people are likely to be intrinsically motivated to act in an environmentally-friendly manner. When people are intrinsically motivated, the motivation comes from within the individual, rather than from external rewards (Frey, 1997). But why would people be intrinsically motivated to act pro-environmentally? We propose that environmental self-identity, that is, the extent to

which one sees oneself as a type of person whose actions are environmentally-friendly, plays an important role in this process.

Research in the environmental domain showed that one's self-identity, that is, the label one uses to describe oneself (Cook et al., 2002), is an important predictor of environmental actions. Specific types of environmental self-identity appeared to be related to a range of pro-environmental actions, including eco-shopping, energy conservation, pro-environmental behaviours, recycling and environmental activism (Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010; Gatersleben et al., 2012; Nigbur et al., 2010; Fielding et al., 2008). We focus on one's general environmental self-identity, which we define as the extent to which one sees oneself as a type of person whose actions are environmentally-friendly. People with a strong environmental self-identity more strongly see themselves as an environmentally-friendly person and are more likely to act pro-environmentally than those with a weak environmental self-identity. However, not much is known about the process through which self-identity is related to environmental behaviour. Learning more about why people act in an environmentally-friendly manner and if and how self-identity affects such actions will provide more insight into how pro-environmental behaviour

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can be promoted. The aim of the current research is to study if environmental self-identity influences environmental actions, and if so, via which process environmental self-identity influences environmental actions.

Studies on the relationship between environmental self-identity and pro-environmental actions (reported above) suggests that people with a strong environmental self-identity are likely to act in an environmentally-friendly manner when there are no external incentives to do so, as behaviours such as eco-shopping and environmental activism typically involve additional costs or effort. Does this mean that people with a strong environmental self-identity are intrinsically motivated to act in an environmentally-friendly manner? This is not a trivial question, as understanding ways to strengthen one's intrinsic motivation may be an important and cost-efficient way to promote pro-environmental behaviour, because no external incentives (e.g., financial rewards) are needed. In this research, we will test if environmental self-identity is related to environmental behaviour via one's intrinsic motivation to do so.

## 1. Two types of intrinsic motivation

We argue that two different types of intrinsic motivation should be distinguished: enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation, reflecting whether the behaviour itself is enjoyable to do, and obligation-based intrinsic motivation, reflecting whether one feels obliged to follow a particular rule, norm or principle (which may result in pleasant feelings; [Lindenberg, 2001](#)). Enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation is similar to the definition of intrinsic motivation in self-determination theory ([Ryan and Deci, 2000](#)). They define intrinsic motivation as performing behaviour because it is interesting or enjoyable by itself. Obligation-based intrinsic motivation is similar to their definition of introjected regulation, which they define as being motivated out of a sense of obligation related to approval from oneself or others ([Ryan and Deci, 2002](#)). Hence, whereas Deci and Ryan define intrinsic motivation as performing a behaviour because it is enjoyable to do so (and therefore is enjoyment-based), we argue that besides, intrinsic motivation can be obligation-based. Obligation-based intrinsic motivation is similar to personal norm, which is defined as feeling morally obliged to perform a behaviour ([Schwartz, 1973](#)). According to [Lindenberg \(2001\)](#), leisure activities are more likely to be related to enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation, whereas civic behaviours (e.g., tax paying, voting) are more likely to be related to obligation-based intrinsic motivation as such actions are mostly not enjoyable to do so as such, but they may elicit positive feelings by contributing to the good cause. Indeed, when a task is not very interesting or enjoyable, (enjoyment-based) intrinsic motivation, in the sense of the behaviour being fun to perform, becomes less relevant for performing this task ([Vallerand et al., 2008](#)).

As most pro-environmental behaviours are not fun to perform either, we think the obligation-based intrinsic motivation is particularly relevant for environmental behaviour, while enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation is less relevant in the environmental domain. Many environmentally-friendly actions are associated with more effort and less pleasure. For example, showering for shorter periods means less comfort, using green energy may be more of a hassle, cycling is more effortful than driving, and reducing the temperature setting in the house reduces comfort. Hence, many pro-environmental behaviours are probably not performed because the behaviour itself is pleasurable. Indeed, research showed that people who more often perform pro-environmental actions reported a stronger intrinsic motivation to perform these actions than people who less often act in an environmentally-friendly manner ([Pelletier et al., 1998](#)). However, in this study the items measuring intrinsic motivation did not

focus on enjoying the pro-environmental actions for its own sake, but they focused on the pleasure derived from contributing to improving environmental quality. Hence, they did not study whether people engaged in pro-environmental action because of the inherent pleasure for doing so (enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation), but whether people derived pleasure from doing the right thing (in this case, acting pro-environmentally, thus reflecting obligation-based intrinsic motivation). In addition, recent research shows that people with strong hedonic values (who strive for pleasure in life) are likely to refrain from pro-environmental behaviour, probably because these behaviours are not pleasurable or fun or because they reduce comfort ([Steg et al., 2012](#)). This suggests that it is less likely that people are intrinsically motivated to act in an environmentally-friendly manner because of the fun of doing so (i.e., enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation). Instead we expect that environmental self-identity influences behaviour via one's obligation-based intrinsic motivation (i.e., via a moral route), namely that people with a strong environmental self-identity will be more likely to feel morally obliged to act pro-environmentally.

We thus propose that environmental self-identity influences behaviour because it elicits feelings of moral obligation to do so. Some support for this reasoning is found in research on collective action. Like environmental behaviour, collective action (e.g., joining a demonstration) is likely to be associated with more effort and less pleasure. [Van Zomeren et al. \(2012\)](#) found that moral convictions are important for collective action to occur. If people feel strongly about a moral issue they are more likely to engage in collective action. The study showed that this is particularly true for people with identities with a strong normative content (indicating what one ought to do; such as acting pro-environmentally when environmental self-identity is strong), suggesting that people with a strong normative identity are more likely to experience moral feelings and to act in line with their identity. Our line of reasoning is also supported by research that showed that people experience guilt when they do not act in line with their moral identity ([Stets and Carter, 2012](#)). This suggests that people with a strong environmental self-identity may be motivated to act morally (i.e., pro-environmentally) because they feel obliged to do so. Not acting in line with a sense of moral obligation to do so may lead to feelings of guilt ([Schwartz, 1970](#)). However, this correlational study tested whether people with a moral identity feel guilty after refraining from moral actions. We propose that in addition, people anticipate these feelings, that is, they are motivated to act in line with their identity because they anticipate feeling guilty if they would not act in an environmentally-friendly manner.

## 2. Aim of the current research

In the current research we will test if environmental self-identity indeed influences pro-environmental actions via a moral route, thus via an obligation-based intrinsic motivation. More specifically, we test the model in [Fig. 1](#). We first hypothesized that environmental self-identity is related to the obligation-based intrinsic motivation, that is, feelings of moral obligation to act in an environmentally-friendly manner (Hypothesis 1). Second, we hypothesized that feelings of moral obligation to act in an environmentally-friendly manner mediate the relationship between environmental self-identity and environmental intentions (Hypothesis 2). We tested these hypotheses in three studies. In our first study, we tested our hypotheses in a sample of the general population using a correlational design. In the second study, we aimed to replicate our findings with a different indicator of moral obligation and with a different dependent variable as replication is considered a key criterion to establish the validity and reliability of

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