



Does relationship matter? How social distance influences perceptions of responsibility on anthropomorphized environmental objects and conservation intentions

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how perceived social distance impacts the effect of anthropomorphizing the environment on downstream conservation intentions. In three empirical studies, we investigated the mediating effects of perceived weakness and perceived responsibility, as well as the moderating effect of power, on the relationship between social roles and conservation intentions.

1. Introduction

Despite the call to action by world leaders, extant research has shown that the average person is relatively passive with respect to pro-environmental actions (Biel & Thøgersen, 2007; Kalamas, Cleveland, & Laroche, 2014). Such inertia has prompted the investigations of contextual factors that impact conservation behaviors such as social norms (see Biel & Thøgersen, 2007 for a review), choice architecture (e.g. Hutton, Mauser, Filiatrault, & Ahtola, 1986), monetary rewards (van Houwelingen & van Raaij, 1989), and service substitutions (Lebel & Lorek, 2008). In addition, researchers have also explored how individual motivation could influence conservation efforts, such as commitment (Katzev & Johnson, 1983) and goal setting (McCalley & Midden, 2002).

More recently, research has shown that anthropomorphizing the environment (e.g., earth) is an effective way to enhance individual motivation toward conservation efforts (Ahn, Kim, & Aggarwal, 2014; Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013). The advantage of anthropomorphism is driven by the fact that humanizing environmental objects enhances people's sense of connectedness toward them (Tam et al., 2013) thereby arousing people's sense of guilt for being the cause of harm (Ahn et al., 2014). To date, researchers have anthropomorphized environmental objects as general persons to engender this sense of connectedness. However, our sense of connectedness toward others could also be a function of our social distance from them (Wong & Bagozzi, 2005). Consequently, a reduction of social distance toward the

anthropomorphized environmental objects could strengthen our sense of connectedness toward them. Hence, the first research question we seek to address is whether varying social distance by manipulating the social relationships of the anthropomorphized environmental objects can influence conservation intention, relative to anthropomorphizing environmental objects without such social connections. Secondly, if higher levels of social connectedness indeed increase individual conservation intention; the next question is to establish which social role engenders a closer connection. The third question is to explore how these social roles will interact with different power states of individuals to influence conservation intention.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism refers to the assignment of human characteristics to nonhuman entities (Guthrie, 1993). Research has shown that people have an innate need to anthropomorphize inanimate objects, often driven by the motivations to form social connections (Epley, Akalis, et al., 2008), and to exert control over something seemingly unpredictable (Epley, Waytz, et al., 2008). According to Guthrie (1993), it is a cognitive and perceptual strategy that we deploy to understand the world around us. Marketers also encourage consumers to anthropomorphize products and brands, since this will forge stronger brand relations and more positive brand attitudes (Chen, Wan, & Levy, 2017).

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More recently, researchers have begun to explore the effect of anthropomorphizing environmental objects on subsequent conservation behaviors (Ahn et al., 2014; Tam et al., 2013). This approach builds on the insight that anthropomorphized agents are seen as someone similar to us, imbued with consciousness and self-identity; hence, should be treated as moral agents worthy of care and concern (Tam et al., 2013). Therefore, people are more likely to empathize with an anthropomorphized nature (Ahn et al., 2014). Extant research has also shown that the more we consider a nonhuman character to be able to sense and feel, the more we are reluctant to harm it (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). Similarly, people who believe that nature and animals can experience emotion are more likely to be concerned about them (Clayton, Fraser, & Burgess, 2011); hence, the most commonly used “Mother Earth” phrase is probably an attempt to anthropomorphize nature.

In summary, if anthropomorphizing nature can be effective in engendering stronger concern toward the environment, wouldn't it be even stronger if we have a relationship with that anthropomorphized object? Extant research in cross-cultural psychology has shown that our emotional responses are influenced by the social distance of that relationship (Wong & Bagozzi, 2005); therefore, we propose that people would respond differently to anthropomorphized entities represented by different social relationships.

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. Relationships in anthropomorphism

Relationship reduces social distance between individuals (Small & Simonsohn, 2005). Thus, when the environmental object is anthropomorphized to be someone potentially related to us, we should feel closer (i.e. perceive a smaller social distance) toward this object. This reduced social distance between individuals and environmental objects would enhance conservation intentions for two reasons.

First, the reduced social distance brings the individuals and the anthropomorphized environmental objects more closely together. In such conditions, individuals would have a higher tendency to incorporate the anthropomorphized environmental objects as a part of them. This would lead them to see the welfare of the anthropomorphized environmental objects as their own welfare. Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) find that being in a close relationship leads us to incorporate close others into our sense of self and we tend to allocate more resources, be more sensitive toward their feelings (through perspective taking), and perceive them to be more like us; consequently, anthropomorphizing an environmental object as someone close to us elicits a stronger emotional response. The connection between individuals and the anthropomorphized environmental objects also triggers stronger perceived responsibility toward the anthropomorphized environmental objects, which compels individuals to take measures to protect their welfare. This is consistent with research findings that show individuals are more willing to help victims from their in-group rather than their out-group (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002).

Second, and unique to environmental objects, is that the damage they suffer largely stems from human activities. Therefore, when individuals are reminded that their close others (i.e., mother and child) are suffering as a result of their behaviors, they may also experience stronger perceived responsibility and be more motivated to change in order to help the victims; hence, anthropomorphizing an environmental object as someone close to us is more effective in increasing conservation intention:

H1a. Anthropomorphizing an environmental object as someone close to us (versus a person) will increase (have no effect) on conservation intention;

H1b. The closer our social distance toward the anthropomorphized environmental object, the stronger will be our perceived responsibility toward it; and,

H1c. Our perceived responsibility toward the anthropomorphized environmental object will mediate the relationship between the anthropomorphized social roles and conservation intention.

3.2. Are all relationships equal?

Given that we have different types of social relationships; would anthropomorphizing different social roles elicit different levels of responses? People generally have an innate tendency to protect the weak due to a stronger sense of perceived responsibility toward the weak (Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014). The weak have little access to resources, which means they have to rely on others for support. Their stronger need for help may elicit stronger perceived responsibility from individuals to help. Helping, by definition, is only necessary when someone is in obvious need or they are vulnerable because they require protection from future harm; hence, the stronger need for help of the weak generally enables them to get more help in most cases. Literature shows that women are more likely to get help than men, due to their traditional role of being more sheltered and of higher dependency (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Fisher and Ma (2014) also find that beautiful children are at a relative disadvantage in getting help because people tend to relate beauty with positive attributes such as social competence. Batson, Lishner, Cook, and Sawyer (2005) find that undergraduate females are more willing to help a five-year-old dog or a four-month-old puppy than a fellow female student when suffering from the same harm. While the animals depend on them to get protection and recovery, their fellow student can deal with the problem by herself. This evidence suggests that people are more motivated to help the weak who are less able to fend for themselves.

Relative to a mother, a child is often perceived to be weaker. Children are in the process of growing up. Both their strength and cognition are immature and lower than those of adults (Fisher & Ma, 2014). They depend on adults for protection and to grow. Compared to children, women are adults with their strength and cognition in a more mature state. They should have the ability to fend for themselves. The notion that adults should help and protect children is a well-established social norm; therefore, anthropomorphizing an environmental object as a weak person such as a child (as compared to a mother, an adult) is likely to be more effective in eliciting conservation intention:

H2a. Anthropomorphizing the environment as a child (mother) will influence perceptions of weakness (strength); and

H2b. Perception of weakness (strength) will increase (have no effect) on conservation intentions.

3.3. The mediating role of perceived responsibility

Why does the child engender a stronger conservation intention than the mother? We propose that perceived responsibility is the intervening factor here. Attribution theory (Weiner, 2000) suggests that we attribute negative outcomes (pollution) to those who have control and are, thus, responsible (humans). However, the degree of perceived responsibility would be higher toward those who are less able or helpless, just as a child is entitled to more protection than an adult; hence, the weaker the anthropomorphized object is perceived to be, the stronger we would feel responsible for the negative outcomes.

Extant research in anthropomorphism has established the mediating roles of connectedness, anticipated guilt, and empathy (e.g. Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007) of the perceivers in pro-social behaviors. However, these comparisons were based on responses toward anthropomorphic versus non-anthropomorphic objects. In this research, we believe perceived responsibility should better reflect the differential attributions of accountability toward two anthropomorphized environmental objects due to their different relationships with individuals. When environmental objects have close relationships with us,

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