

4th World Conference on Psychology, Counseling and Guidance WCPCG-2013 Environmental Attitudes and Ecological Moral Reasoning in Romanian Students

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Abstract

As a post-communist country, Romania goes through an environmental transition, trying to solve important ecological issues caused by the forced industrialisation from the communist era. Environmental concerns become more pressing as, people's environmental attitudes change very slowly while European ecological standards should already be met. One hundred thirty one psychology students were surveyed to assess their environmental attitudes and explore the relationship they have to ecological moral reasoning. Although most of the participants reported internally motivated pro-environmental attitudes, two thirds of them didn't always choose the ecological alternative when confronted with the moral dilemmas. Even if environmental attitudes have an important role in predicting ecological behaviour, other factors are essential in ensuring the transition from attitudes to behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Post-communist countries like Romania are described by a specific context in environment protection policies. They go through a period of environmental transition, having as main objective the resolution of serious problems caused by the forced industrialisation that took place during the communist period (Corpade, 2001). At the same time, being part of the European Union sets high ecological standards that Romanian institutions have to meet. People's environmental attitudes change very slowly. Moreover, when pro-environmental attitudes exist, the gap between attitudes and behaviour is even harder to cross. In addition, during the economic crisis, people become more self-centred and focused on satisfying their basic needs. Priorities change and environmental problems become less important to them.

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Factors that influence the transition from attitudes to behaviour have been the topic of numerous studies. Values, beliefs and personal ethics are part of the ingredients considered to determine people's actions on environmental problems. The value-belief-norm theory is one of the models explaining what influences our behaviours when ecological issues are involved (Stern, Deitz, & Kalof, 1993; Dietz, Fitzgerald, & Schwom, 2005; Berenguer, 2010). This approach considers that people will show environmental behaviours when they believe they can protect environmental aspects that are important to them (Berenguer, 2010). Each person values different natural attributes and will find the reasons and motives to act in different ways (Bjerke & Kalternborn, 1999). To determine people to initiate action and create real changes in their behaviour towards the environment, their beliefs, values and motivation need to be changed (Tilbury, 1995; Sosa, 1996). Values are the expression of what is important for each individual. They define the way a person behaves and evaluates different people and situations. Values and attitudes are different principles, values being more general, abstract and stable, deeper rooted in the individual self – concept and harder to change (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz, 1994; Feather, 1995). Values hold different importance and have a hierarchical organization in a person's life. The social environment and the individual experiences form and prioritise the value hierarchy.

Attitudes are typically reflected in people's behaviour and they play an important role in their life choices. Values seem to be even more significant in explaining a person's psychological determinism. People who care for the environment are more altruistic and set the environmental values higher in their hierarchy (Dunlap et al., 2000; Poortinga et al, 2004; Schultz et al, 2005). Consistency between one's values and behaviours is a general need (Feather, 1995; Sagiv & Schwartz, 1995). However research shows, pro-environmental attitudes or even values do not always guarantee pro-environmental behaviour. Environmental, altruistic values are socially desirable and might be over reported, values are general, abstract concepts while behaviour is assessed in very specific situations (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and values need to be salient to influence the behaviour (Verplanken & Holland, 2002).

All of these studies have a general moral, ethical foundation. Tilbury (1995) stated that people have to develop a personal environmental ethic. The concept of environmental ethics was described decades ago by Leopold Aldo (1949). He considered the development of the environmental ethics a possible evolution for mankind and an ecological necessity. Morality should be extended to contain the relationship between humans and nature (Leopold, 1949).

The present study aimed at assessing environmental attitudes in Romanian students and exploring the relationship between their environmental attitudes and ecological moral reasoning.

2. Method

The participants were 131 psychology undergraduate students enrolled in the third year of studies at the University "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" in Iasi. They took part in the current study during an environmental psychology class. Participation was voluntary. They first had to answer to four moral dilemmas having environmental topics. The dilemmas were translated and adapted from previous studies (Axelrod, 1994; Beringer, 1994; Kortenkanmp & Moore, 2001). This method was used before in several other studies (Kortenkanmp & Moore, 2001, Berenguer, 2010). The dilemmas described specific situations where the main character could chose to behave in favor or against protecting the environment. They presented four different topics: protect a common area of grazing land from overuse or take advantage of a very convenient deal to purchase new cattle; protect an old growth forest from clear-cut harvest or support the deforestation to get a secure job and income for the next period of time; vote for building a new landfill site in a nature preserve or for creating a new ecological collection system that would require more effort and new fees; cut a tree for needed firewood from the nearby forest preserve or walk further up on the steep slopes in search for wood. Participants were asked to choose if the main character should have or not a pro-environmental behavior. Their answer scores were added to obtain a total score showing participants' ecological moral concern. The order of the dilemmas was counterbalanced. To assess the environmental attitudes, all participants filled in the Environmental Attitudes Scale developed by Ebenbach, Moore and Parsil (1998). The scale is designed to distinguish between internally and externally motivated pro-environmental attitudes. It also assesses anti-environmental attitudes. The internal environmental attitude scale has 8 items, 5 of which are reversed ($\alpha = .76$),

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