Journal of Environmental Psychology 49 (2017) 18–29

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Environmental Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jep

Environmental peer persuasion: How moral exporting and belief superiority relate to efforts to influence others

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 June 2016
Received in revised form
22 November 2016
Accepted 24 November 2016
Available online 25 November 2016

Keywords:
Moral exporting
Belief superiority
Environmental attitudes
Environmental behavior
Peer persuasion
Interpersonal influence

ABSTRACT

Traditional research on environmental behavior has explored the predictors of behavior change as a function of intervention efforts from an authority. The current research examines self-reported environmental behavior outside of these contexts, and in particular demonstrates the value in asking *who* attempts to influence the environmental behaviors of their peers. Environmental moral exporting and environmental belief superiority both related to efforts to influence the environmental behaviors of others, albeit in different ways. People high in moral exporting were more active in their efforts to influence the environmental behaviors of others, preferred a two-way dialogue between individuals, and enjoyed such interactions. Alternatively, individuals high in environmental belief superiority put relatively less effort into influencing others, compared to those high in environmental moral exporting, and tended to avoid environmental conversations. When individuals high in environmental belief superiority did have those conversations, they were likely to get frustrated and attempted to dominate the conversations. This research demonstrates the value in asking who tries to influence the environmental behavior of others and how they do so.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Every year near Thanksgiving, articles emerge online that coach people on how to convince their relatives over dinner of the realities of climate change. Of great relevance to such conversations, social and environmental psychologists have traditionally examined the factors that influence the likelihood of successful persuasion attempts. Much of this work has focused on experimental research contexts and researcher-induced persuasion efforts (e.g., Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). A multitude of persuasion methods used by authorities, including researchers, has been examined in the literature. These methods include framing environmental issues in terms of domains or analogies with which people are more familiar (Asensio & Delmas, 2015; Corner & Pidgeon, 2015; Stern & Raimi, 2015), appealing to people's core moral and political values (Campbell & Kay, 2014; Feinberg & Willer, 2012), and making environmental issues personally relevant to people's physical environment (Hart & Nisbet, 2012; McDonald, Chai, & Newell, 2015).

However, most persuasion efforts that occur in the real world are not from the authorities, but rather from peer-to-peer. Despite how common conversations on environmental issues may be between family members, friends, and strangers, we know shockingly little about how people approach these conversations. Furthermore, even though certain types of people are probably more likely to initiate and persist in these interpersonal conversations, we know even less about theoretically-grounded individual differences that may relate to *who* tries to influence the environmental behaviors of others through conversations (Swim, 2013).

1.2. Efforts to influence the environmental beliefs and behaviors of others

Early work in environmental psychology focused on the spread, or diffusion, of environmental behaviors between individuals. For example, researchers considered the factors that make it more likely that energy-efficient technologies spread through one's

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2016.11.005
0272-4944/

social network over time (Brown, 1984; Darley, 1978). More recently, particular attention has been paid to adoption of home solar panels across shared geographical space (Noonan, Hsieh, & Matisoff, 2013; Zhang, Vorobeychik, Letchford, & Lakkaraju, 2016). Much of this research has focused on whether environmental behaviors spread over time, rather than on the processes that lead to this spreading of environmental behaviors. However, recent work has begun to examine how these behaviors may spread. Southwell and Murphy (2014), for example, found that those who purchase home weatherization improvements are more likely to talk to their friends and family members about the topic of home weatherization compared to those who do not purchase home weatherization improvements. People tended to engage in these conversations out of a desire help other people save money, but also to encourage others to engage in positive environmental actions. Other findings suggest that people often avoid discussing environmental topics like climate change in part due to inaccurate perceptions of others' beliefs (Geiger & Swim, 2016).

Potential processes explaining the spread of environmental behaviors include modeling of behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), displays of social norms (Schultz et al., 2007), direct confrontations with others engaged in a harmful environmental behavior (Nolan, 2013), active persuasion attempts (Burn, 1991; Peterson, Smith, Tannenbaum, & Shaw, 2009), and passive introductions of the topic in conversation without overt attempts to persuade (Rodgers & Rowe, 1993; Southwell & Murphy, 2014). All of these processes could help explain how one person influences another's environmental behavior. Yet little work in the environmental psychology area has considered individual differences that make it more likely that people will attempt to influence the environmental beliefs and behaviors of others through these processes. One exception is work by Nolan (2013), who found that individuals vary in both their willingness to confront litterers and their perceptions of how effective it is to intervene to stop littering. However, greater appreciation of the types of individuals who try to influence the environmental beliefs and behaviors of others more generally would help us appreciate when behaviors tend to spread during interpersonal interactions.

Two individual differences are of particular relevance when considering this question of who approaches others about environmental issues: environmental moral exporting and environmental belief superiority.

1.3. Environmental moral exporting and interpersonal influence

Moral exporting is one way in which people try to influence the behaviors of others. Moral exporting has traditionally been explored in political contexts, and refers to people's willingness to try to get others to adopt their moral values (Peterson et al., 2009). People high in moral exporting tend to have both a strong belief about moral issues and an action orientation toward influencing others. Political conservatives, those high in need for closure, and those professing moral absolutism tend to be higher in moral exporting, potentially reflecting their desire for a social environmental that is consistent with their own values (Peterson et al., 2009).

Although general moral exporting tendencies appear to be more likely in conservatives, this may not be the case for domain-specific moral exporting. Moral exporting was originally conceptualized as a general orientation, yet people may vary in how much they try to export their moral values in distinct domains, including their environmental values. Those who endorse environmental moral exporting beliefs should be more willing to try to change others' minds about environmental issues, and they should be more likely to try to influence the environmental behaviors of other people. Even though conservatives are more likely to engage in general moral exporting, Gallup polling suggests that liberals tend to rank environment-related issues, including climate change, as more important than conservatives do (Jones, 2015). Thus, liberals may actually be more likely to engage in environmental moral exporting due to the strength of their beliefs in this domain. Such a finding specific to environmental moral exporting would add important nuance to the current general moral exporting literature.

Though individuals high in moral exporting should be more likely to hold strong views about environmental issues, environmental moral exporting does not presume a *direction* of belief. For many people with strong environmentally relevant beliefs, those beliefs are pro-environmental. Yet they do not have to be pro-environmental to be strongly held or subject to moral exporting. Imagine, for example, a conservative who is a committed climate change skeptic and sees the “hoax” of climate change as the most important issue of our time. She might spend a great deal of effort trying to convert others to her position. Thus, whereas liberals as a group may be higher in environmental moral exporting than conservatives, this characteristic of the construct allows us to consider conservatives who are also high in environmental moral exporting.

This characteristic makes environmental moral exporting conceptually distinct from similar constructs in the literature, such as environmental identity (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010), environmental attitudes (Milfont & Duckitt, 2010), and environmental values (Schultz & Zelezny, 1999) that presume a particular direction of beliefs or attitudes. Furthermore, holding certain environmental attitudes or identifying as an environmentalist does not necessarily mean people are willing to act on their attitudes or identity in interpersonal contexts. Thus, environmental moral exporting may be a particularly useful individual difference to consider when trying to understand interpersonal environmental influence and environmental conversations.

In addition to exploring how environmental moral exporting relates to efforts to influence others, people high in moral exporting may have distinct types of conversational experiences when engaging with others. They may be eager to talk to others about environmental issues, may enjoy the conversations, and—given their action orientation—may desire a sincere interaction that can lead to meaningful change. People high in environmental moral exporting should be interested in creating a social environment that matches their values, thus making them more likely to be willing to engage in other social vigilantism efforts, more willing to confront the transgressions of others, and more optimistic about the effectiveness of their efforts. Exploring how environmental moral exporting relates to these constructs would help tease apart the unique ways in which environmental moral exporting relates to efforts to influence others' environmental behaviors and individuals' conversational experiences.

1.4. Environmental belief superiority and interpersonal influence

Related to environmental moral exporting is the concept of environmental belief superiority. Belief superiority is the belief that one's own views are more correct than other positions (Raimi, Jongman-Sereno, & Leary, under review). Belief superiority has also been studied as a general construct (general belief superiority; GBS), one that is related to a number of others constructs including social vigilantism, overconfidence about skills and traits, dogmatism, and the certainty and confidence with which people hold their beliefs (Raimi et al., under review).

In addition to these linear relationships between general belief superiority and related constructs, a pattern has emerged with belief superiority, in which the more extreme people's attitudes are on a given subject, the more superior they tend to feel about those