



Analysis

Environmental concerns, volunteering and subjective well-being: Antecedents and outcomes of environmental activism in Germany[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Do perceptions about the state of the environment impact on individuals' well-being and do they lead to environmental activism? While the impact of objective features of the environment (e.g., pollution, parks) is well-researched, the present paper fills a research gap by analyzing how concerns about the environment impact on subjective well-being. Based on German panel data (SOEP) for the years 1984–2012, we show that egoistic concerns have a negative impact on subjective well-being while altruistic concerns are positively associated with well-being, an effect likely driven by omitting variables for environmental activism such as volunteer work. We show that environmental concerns also lead to an increased propensity to volunteer and such volunteering is positively associated with well-being, but only for those who are very concerned about the environment.

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1. Introduction

The transition to a “Green Economy” is an important topic in current politics, with governments aiming to create an economy that is internationally competitive as well as environmentally and socially acceptable to its citizens. In Germany, the overarching goals of such a transition are to connect ecological and economic concerns and increase welfare while protecting the environment (e.g., BMBF, 2014). Politicians' concern for environmental issues is a reflection of the awareness for the environment in the populace. But are increasing awareness and environmental concerns on an individual level also related to individual well-being and do they translate into individual action?

Previous research indicates that the objective quality of the environment impacts on individual subjective well-being (Welsch, 2007) and studying the impact of the environment on subjective well-being is

important for environmental regulation and management, helping to improve environmental policy (Welsch and Kuehling, 2009). The recent literature investigates especially disasters and their consequences (Berger, 2010; Goebel et al., 2014) and climate change (Rehdanz and Maddison, 2005; Maddison and Rehdanz, 2011). Few studies, on the other hand, address subjective perceptions of the environment such as concerns (or syn. “worries”) about the environment (e.g., Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy, 2007; Binder and Ward, 2013, passim). While there is some evidence that environmental concerns can influence purchasing behavior or energy consumption (Tatić and Činjurević, 2010; Urban and Ščasny, 2012), their impact on subjective well-being and volunteering in general has not yet been systematically analyzed.¹

The present paper contributes to filling this research gap by tying together research on environmental concerns and volunteering. Previous research has found mixed results about the impact of environmental concerns on subjective well-being: While Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy (2007) find a positive association of concerns for biodiversity but a negative of ozone layer depletion with subjective well-being, Binder and Ward (2013) find a positive impact of altruistic concerns (concerns about the environment and world peace) on subjective well-being (and a negative impact of selfish concerns such as concerns

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¹ There is also related research on how behavior can impact on attitudes and concerns (Vining and Ebreo, 1992; Ballantyne et al., 2011), but the present paper is interested in analyzing the opposite direction of causality.

with job security). Both studies did not control for the relation of such individual concerns to actual individual action, such as volunteering or other environmental activism, thus possibly confounding the effect of concerns with the effect of volunteering (Meier and Stutzer, 2008). In order to address this issue, we use data over nearly three decades from the German Socio-Economic Panel Data Survey (SOEP) to analyze different types of concerns and their consequences for life- and environmental satisfaction as well as pro-environmental activities.

First, we examine the link between (environmental) concerns and how they influence subjective well-being (contributing to a line of research pioneered by Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy (2007); Binder and Ward (2013)). In addition we take a deeper look at the interplay of concerns and volunteering and their impact on subjective well-being. Environmental concerns impact positively on subjective well-being but this effect is likely to be driven through concerned individuals volunteering more and drawing satisfaction from these altruistic activities. The second contribution of our paper lies in analyzing the impact of volunteering activities and concerns on satisfaction with the environment more narrowly. We find that environmental satisfaction is negatively influenced by one's environmental concerns, and this effect seems not to decrease with increased volunteering. Our third contribution is that we shift from the outcomes to the antecedents of volunteering, i.e. we investigate the impact of concerns as antecedents of volunteering activities like the participation in environmental organizations or political organizations. Our work here contributes to the literature on the "value-action gap" (Blake, 1999; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002) in environmental activism. Environmental concerns do increase the likelihood of volunteering, especially if one is very concerned. They do, however, not increase the likelihood of participating in local political initiatives.

The paper proceeds in the following way. Section 2 gives an overview of the theoretical background and presents our hypotheses. Section 3 contains an overview of the data followed by the results in Section 4. We conclude in Section 5.

2. Theoretical Background

The use of subjective well-being data in environmental economics has increased steadily in the last years. It contributes to our understanding of how citizens perceive and value the environment (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy, 2007) and can thus help to legitimize public policy and evaluate its welfare impact (Welsch, 2007; Helliwell et al., 2015).² The link between subjective well-being and the environment is complex and studies focus on a variety of topics, such as the relationship between subjective well-being and climate/air pollution (Welsch, 2002, 2006, 2007; Rehdanz and Maddison, 2005; Maddison and Rehdanz, 2011; Cuñado and de Gracia, 2013; Sekulova and van den Bergh, 2013; Li et al., 2014), the link between subjective well-being and natural hazards (Luechinger and Raschky, 2009), the link between subjective well-being and environmental degradation (e.g. water pollution, noise, see Israel and Levinson (2003); Van Praag and Baarsma (2005)), and in the extreme case: the impact of disasters (such as the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima) on well-being and related environmental concerns afterwards (Berger, 2010; Rehdanz et al., 2013; Goebel et al., 2014; Welsch and Biermann, 2014).

Research on environmental concerns itself, too, has a long tradition, focussing on their multifaceted determinants (such as age, income, gender, type of residence, education, see e.g. Van Liere and Dunlap (1980); Aklin et al. (2013); Xiao and Dunlap (2007)). But only very few studies deal with the impact that environmental concerns have on subjective

well-being (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy, 2007; Binder and Ward, 2013). While Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy (2007) find a positive association of concerns for biodiversity but a negative of ozone layer depletion with subjective well-being (analyzing a cross-section of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) data set), Binder and Ward (2013), *passim*, find a positive impact of altruistic concerns (concerns about the environment and world peace) on subjective well-being (and a negative impact of selfish concerns such as concerns with job security) for the German Socio-Economic Panel Survey (SOEP). Both studies did not control for the relation of such individual concerns to actual individual action, such as volunteering or other environmental activism, thus possibly confounding the effect of concerns with the effect of volunteering (volunteering is generally associated with higher subjective well-being, see Meier and Stutzer (2008)). This latter concern is relevant because existing research (see below) shows that environmental concerns may translate into environmental action, which then again might have in turn a bearing on subjective well-being.

Such consequences of environmental concerns in terms of pro-environmental behavior have been analyzed before: for example, research indicates that environmental concerns have an impact on purchasing behavior or energy consumption (Tatić and Činžarević, 2010; Urban and Ščasny, 2012).³ Depending on the concrete form of behavior, the evidence for environmental concerns triggering behavior is mixed, however (Nord et al., 1998), and seems to be strongly correlated with wealth (Franzen, 2003). Pro-environmental behavior is not an automatic result of environmental concerns as there often exists the so-called "value-action-gap" between people's values/preferences (i.e. the perception of environmental problems) and possible actions.⁴ Evidence suggests that this gap is not a rare event, with, e.g., one study reporting that 72% of their respondents admitted that they observe a gap between their actions and their intentions (Kennedy et al., 2009).⁵

When it comes to better understanding whether environmental concerns can lead to pro-environmental behavior and what factors drive such behavior, it also makes sense to turn to the literature on volunteering and its antecedents.⁶ According to the "volunteering process model", it is possible to distinguish between three phases of volunteering, namely antecedents, experience and consequences (Snyder and Omoto, 1992; Wilson and Musick, 1997). As antecedents, different (individual) motives have been identified as leading to volunteering activities. These include the motive to help others, the expression of personal values, the search for new friends, the acquisition of new skills, the development of better career opportunities, cognitive and emotional changes (to develop the self), or the aim to enhance the self-esteem as well as the reduction of ego conflicts and identity threats (Unger, 1991; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Ziemek, 2006; Prouteau and Wolff, 2008). It is likely that most people volunteer for a mixture of these motives, in part altruistic and in part egoistic (Meier and Stutzer, 2008) and the literature has also identified other factors that drive volunteering such as education (Huang et al., 2009; Putnam, 2000, ch. 7), hours worked (Wilson, 2000), or gender (Wilson and Musick, 1999). Especially education is likely to play an important role here since it has been shown that higher education tends to be a prerequisite for environmental awareness (Meyer, 2015).

The literature on volunteering also indicates that volunteering positively impacts on health and subjective well-being of the volunteer

³ The term "pro-environmental behavior" is used in the literature to describe all activities aiming at the reduction of the negative impact of the single individual (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002).

⁴ The value-action gap is defined as "the observed disparity between people's reported concerns about key environmental, social, economic or ethical concerns and the lifestyle or purchasing decisions that they make in practice" (Sustainable Development Commission, 2006, p. 63).

⁵ The value-action-gap literature is extensive and seems most concerned with the question of how to reduce the gap (Blake, 1999; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Chai et al., 2015).

⁶ Volunteering itself encompasses all forms of work where people behave altruistically and prosocial (sometimes for extended time periods), without getting paid for it (Omoto and Snyder, 1990; Wilson, 2000) or where they are even willing to pay for their volunteering work (Campbell and Smith, 2006).

² Interest in subjective well-being as measure of welfare has been discussed under the label "Beyond GDP" (e.g., Stiglitz et al., 2009; Fleurbaey, 2009; Graham, 2012). Such subjective well-being measures are valid and reliable (Frey and Stutzer, 2005; Krueger and Schkade, 2008). For an overview over the main determinants of subjective well-being, see e.g. Frey and Stutzer (2002, 2005); Dolan et al. (2008); Graham (2009) and Layard et al. (2012). Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy (2007) make a convincing case why environmental economics should be interested in subjective well-being as measure of welfare/quality of life instead of the more common income-based measures and their extensions.

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