



Environmental considerations in the organizational context: A pathway to pro-environmental behaviour at work



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ABSTRACT

Encouraging pro-environmental behaviour at work can result in a significant reduction in environmental problems. Research revealed that general environmental considerations such as biospheric values and environmental self-identity are important antecedents of private pro-environmental behaviour. Yet, the question remains whether such general environmental considerations also predict pro-environmental behaviour at work. We propose a parsimonious theoretical model (the VIP-model) in which biospheric values affect personal norms to behave pro-environmentally at work and pro-environmental actions via the environmental self-identity. A study involving a diverse sample of employees from different European organizations supported the VIP-model, showing that biospheric values and environmental self-identity influence personal norms, and that stronger personal norms encouraged various self-reported pro-environmental behaviours at work to some extent. The VIP-model yields promising, cost-efficient strategies to encourage pro-environmental behaviour at work.

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1. Introduction

Human behaviour causes many environmental problems due to greenhouse gas emissions, pollution and the use of natural resources, raw materials and energy [21,48]. These environmental problems are partly caused by environmental behaviour, which refers to any behaviour that has an impact on the environment, both good and bad [52,53]. Much research has been conducted on understanding and encouraging pro-environmental behaviour, that is, behaviour that harms the environment as little as possible or even benefits it [52]. Until now, most studies focused on factors influencing private or household pro-environmental behaviour [4,44,53]. Yet, within a lifetime people spend a major part of their time at work, and encouraging pro-environmental behaviour at the workplace or within organizations can result in a significant reduction in environmental problems [9,10,12,14]. For example, workers

can use less office supplies, recycle at work, they may make business trips by public transport instead of by car or even arrange virtual meetings, or they may turn off lights, the heating or appliances when no one is in the office. How can we encourage such pro-environmental behaviour at work? Although studies on private and household pro-environmental behaviour yielded important insights in factors encouraging pro-environmental behaviour, the question remains whether results of these studies can be generalized to pro-environmental behaviour in the organizational context.

Importantly, pro-environmental behaviour is often more costly for the actor (e.g., in the sense of money, time or effort) in the short term, than behavioural alternatives that are more harmful for the environment [60]. So, people oftentimes need to incur some personal costs to benefit the environment [44]. Research on private pro-environmental behaviour has shown that many people are willing and intrinsically motivated to engage in pro-environmental behaviours at home, even though this is somewhat costly [2,19,44]. General environmental considerations that make people focus on doing “the right thing” for the environment, appeared to play an important role in this respect [22,44,48,53,52]. Notably, research on pro-environmental behaviour in the private sphere shows that two conceptually distinct but related types of

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general environmental considerations motivate people to engage in a range of pro-environmental behaviours: biospheric values (e.g. [17,28,49]) and environmental self-identity (e.g. [34,56,58,59,62]); we will elaborate on these in the next section. If biospheric values and environmental self-identity are indeed generic predictors of environmental behaviour, we would expect that they influence behaviours at work in a similar way and via similar processes as behaviour at home. Hence, an important question is: are such general environmental considerations relevant for understanding environmental behaviour in the organizational context as well?

In the present paper we will examine to what extent and via which processes biospheric values and environmental self-identity affect environmental behaviour at work. Below, we propose and test a novel parsimonious theoretical model for explaining how general environmental considerations, in particular biospheric values and environmental self-identity, predict environmental behaviour at work, building on research on pro-environmental behaviour in the private sphere.

1.1. The Value-Identity-Personal norms (VIP) model

Many studies revealed that values play an important role in explaining pro-environmental beliefs, norms and behaviour in the private sphere (see Refs. [20,46] for reviews). Values are defined as general desirable trans-situational goals varying in importance, which serve as a guiding principle in people's life [42]. Values are abstract and general and remain relatively stable over time [50], and as such, are likely to affect a wide range of different beliefs, norms and behaviours. Especially biospheric values have proven to be important and consistent predictor for understanding and explaining environmental behaviour: people are more likely to engage in various pro-environmental behaviours when they strongly endorse biospheric values (e.g. [17,28]; see Ref. [46] for a review). People with strong biospheric values particularly consider the consequences of their behaviour for the quality of nature and the environment, and strongly base their decisions on how these will affect the costs and benefits for the ecosystem and biosphere as a whole [44].

Because values are abstract and general, they mainly predict environmental behaviour indirectly. One important route through which biospheric values promote pro-environmental behaviour may be via environmental self-identity. Environmental self-identity reflects the extent to which an individual sees himself or herself as a type of person who acts pro-environmentally and prescribes a course of action that is compatible with this sense of how the individual sees himself or herself [58]. Research on environmental behaviour in the private sphere has shown that people with strong biospheric values are more likely to see themselves as a person who acts pro-environmentally [34,57,58]. Yet, there is only initial evidence that environmental self-identity mediates the effect of biospheric values on pro-environmental behaviour [58].

The next question is: why are people motivated to act in line with their environmental self-identity? Initial research on environmental behaviour in the private sphere revealed that environmental self-identity affects pro-environmental behaviour by strengthening personal norms to act pro-environmentally [56]. Personal norms reflect self-expectations and are experienced as feelings of moral obligation to engage in the relevant behaviour [41]. Individuals with strong personal norms to act pro-environmentally feel morally obliged to behave accordingly [40,56]. Personal norms can be general, for example the personal norm to engage in pro-environmental behaviour in general, or more specific, for example the personal norm to recycle [13]. Studies revealed that strong general as well as specific environmental personal norms indeed encourage many different pro-environmental behaviours, such as turning off the tap while brushing one's teeth

[27], willingness to pay higher prices for environmentally friendly food [61], intention to participate in actions to reduce emissions of particulate matters [45], reductions in car use [37], as well as pro-environmental actions in general (e.g. [36,56]). Yet, personal norms are not always very predictive of behaviour. In general, it seems that people are most likely to act upon their feelings of moral obligation when this behaviour is not too costly and when they do not perceive significant barriers for doing so [5,48]. It seems that people are willing to incur some personal costs and act upon their personal norms in order to do the right thing such as protecting the environment, but if the context seriously constrains such behaviours, in the sense that the setting does inhibit such behaviours or the behavioural costs are too high, individuals may not act upon their personal norms (see Ref. [52], for a review).

On the basis of the above, we suggest that biospheric values influence environmental self-identity, which in turn strengthens personal norms to act pro-environmentally, eventually influencing (the likelihood of) a wide range of environmental behaviours, not only in the private sphere, but also at work. More specifically, we propose the Value-Identity-Personal norms (VIP) model to explain how general environmental considerations (biospheric values and environmental self-identity) predict pro-environmental behaviour at work, in which biospheric values (V) affect the strength of the environmental self-identity (I), which influences personal norms to behave pro-environmentally at work (P) and ultimately pro-environmental behaviour at work (see Fig. 1). The research above provided fragmented evidence for the relationships between values, environmental self-identity, and personal norms affecting environmental behaviour, that is, previous studies have tested parts of the VIP-model only. In this paper, we aim to examine the predictive power of the full VIP-model, for the first time. Notably, we test the VIP-model in the organizational context.

1.2. The VIP-model predicting pro-environmental behaviour at work

Biospheric values and environmental self-identity are general environmental considerations that are not focused on a particular domain or context. Although research revealed that biospheric values and environmental self-identity predicted a wide range of pro-environmental beliefs, norms, intentions and behaviours at home [44], it is as yet not clear whether they also predict pro-environmental behaviour in a different context, notably at work. On the one hand we could argue that strong biospheric values and a strong environmental self-identity would strengthen feelings of moral obligations to behave pro-environmentally in different contexts, including pro-environmental behaviour at work. On the other hand, however, different processes may play a role in the workplace. For example, employees may not translate their biospheric values and environmental self-identity into personal norms at work, and hence they may not feel morally obliged to act pro-environmentally within the organizational context, because they feel behaving pro-environmentally at work is not within their control or their personal responsibility [39]. Current practices indeed suggest that it is generally believed that individuals do not feel morally obliged to behave pro-environmentally at work. For example, many organizations employ external incentives and sanctions to encourage pro-environmental behaviour at work (e.g., penalties for not conforming to strict printing policies, reimbursing travel cost only when employees use pro-environmental means of transport), which suggests that they do not trust that employees are likely to behave in such a manner otherwise [18,25,53]. Yet, the enforcement of such sanctions can be difficult, reducing their effectiveness. Consistent enforcement of sanctions may even not be possible in many situations. Therefore, it is important to find out whether employees may feel morally obligated to behave pro-

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