

## Yes, I can: Feeling connected to others increases perceived effectiveness and socially responsible behavior



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### ABSTRACT

A crucial determinant of socially responsible behavior is the extent to which people perceive their contributions to the collective good to be effective. We suggest that the sense of connectedness to others is an important driver of the perceived effectiveness of one's actions. The more individuals feel connected to others, the more they believe that their actions have a substantial impact on the collective good. As a result, those who feel more connected are more likely to engage in socially responsible behavior. We tested these predictions in one correlational and three experimental studies, involving behavioral measures such as exerting effort in support of a pro-environmental organization and contributing financially to a social cause. The data supported the hypothesized relationship between sense of connectedness, the perceived effectiveness of one's actions, and socially responsible behavior.

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Going green, purchasing fair trade products, making energy conservation efforts, recycling, and donating money to disaster relief or to organizations fighting hunger and poverty; these are all examples of socially responsible behavior, or individual contributions to the collective good. Such contributions are desirable from a collective perspective, but are often costly or inconvenient for the individual. A crucial factor in people's decision to act in a socially responsible manner is the extent to which they believe that their actions make a difference (Ellen, Wiener, & Cobb-Walgreen, 1991). Therefore, understanding the determinants of the belief that one's contributions have an impact is essential for the promotion of socially responsible behavior. In this paper, we argue that people's sense of connectedness is one of those determinants.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we offer a more comprehensive account of the psychological processes involved in explaining the effect of connectedness on socially responsible behavior. Previous research has suggested that those who feel

connected to others are more likely to hold prosocial values (e.g., Triandis, 1995). This explains, to a certain extent, the positive relationship between the sense of connectedness and socially responsible behavior (e.g., Gärling, Fujii, Gärling, & Jakobsson, 2003; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Van Lange, Van Vugt, Meertens, & Ruiters, 1998). We argue that a complementary mechanism linking the sense of connectedness and socially responsible behavior runs via the belief that one's actions make a difference. In other words, a heightened sense of connectedness increases the motivation to act in the collective interest because it increases the chances of an affirmative answer not only to the question "Do I value the common good?", but also to the question "Am I able to make a difference?". Fig. 1 shows our hypothesized conceptual model.

Second, our model suggests novel ways to promote socially responsible behavior. In particular, activating individuals' sense of connectedness motivates them to act in the interest of the collective wellbeing. Whereas it may be difficult to "mold" people's prosocial values in the short term because the development of values is a relatively slow process, we show that making the sense of connectedness salient makes people feel that their actions make more of a difference, which in turn motivates socially responsible behavior.

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## 1. Socially responsible behavior

*Socially responsible behaviors* are “actions taken by individuals to enhance societal well-being (“do good”) or to avoid harmful consequences for the collective (“do no harm”)” (Crilly, Schneider, & Zollo, 2008, p. 176). Typically, situations in which society as a whole calls on its individual members to contribute to the common good, such as in the service of preserving the natural environment or setting up a fair system of economic exchange, take the form of a social dilemma. There are two main reasons why people often fail to take responsibility for the collective interest in such situations. First, social dilemmas are settings in which the individual and the collective interests collide (Dawes, 1980): it is in each individual's short term interest not to make costly contributions (e.g., when making commuting decisions, it is tempting to enjoy the flexibility and comfort of one's car rather than to use public transport), although the collective would benefit from individuals making these contributions (e.g., if more people would take public transport, levels of polluting emissions would drop). As a result of this conflict, people may be tempted to refrain from actions that are beneficial to society (Messick & Brewer, 1983). Second, the issues at stake often unfold on a large scale (e.g., climate change), such that each individual action produces negligible effects (Messick & Brewer, 1983). Consistent with this idea, previous research found that people believe that the effectiveness of their contribution in social dilemmas becomes smaller, as group size increases (Kerr, 1989). This may demotivate people to take responsibility. The collective, however, through concerted effort, can be an influential agent (Bandura, 2000). Therefore, the promotion of socially responsible behavior is crucial for addressing many societal challenges.

Research on socially responsible behavior in social dilemmas has devoted much attention to the role of social values. Social values refer to the weight people place on the collective interest when making decisions (Messick & McClintock, 1968). It is therefore sensible to assume that an individual with stronger prosocial values is more likely to engage in socially responsible behavior. This relationship has been demonstrated in various settings, such as choosing public transport to reduce road congestion, helping behavior, and intentions to behave pro-environmentally (Gärling et al., 2003; McClintock & Allison, 1989; Nauta, De Dreu, & van der Vaart, 2002; Van Lange et al., 1998). However, other studies found little relationship between concern for collective goals and socially responsible behavior (Crosby, Gill, & Taylor, 1981; Ritchie & Gordon, 1985; Scott, 1977). The inconsistent results suggest that caring for the collective good does not guarantee that individuals will behave in a socially responsible manner. Indeed, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) argued that the effect of social values is mostly limited to increased *ideological support* for and the endorsement of policy changes in favor of the collective wellbeing. To produce a change in *actual behavior*, other factors must play a role.

Previous research points to an important barrier for socially

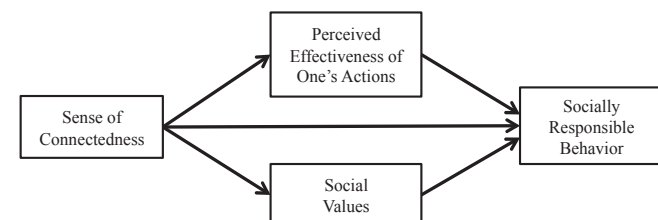


Fig. 1. Hypothesized conceptual model.

responsible behavior: the feeling that individuals can only have a negligible impact on the larger scale (e.g., Ellen et al., 1991; Jackson, 2005; Stoll-Kleemann, O'Riordan, & Jaeger, 2001). Even when they are aware of a problem, and wish to contribute to its solution, individuals may perceive that they have no “agency to have much effect” (Owens, 2000, p. 1143). Thus, beyond holding prosocial values, the belief that one's actions can make a difference is a necessary precursor of socially responsible behavior (Hinkle, Fox-Cardamone, Haseleu, Brown, & Irwin, 1996; Kinnear, Taylor, & Ahmed, 1974). For example, in a study of social activism, only those individuals who perceived their actions as effective acted on their beliefs (Hinkle et al., 1996). Similarly, Fiske (1987) showed that perceived effectiveness differentiated inactive versus active participants in an anti-war movement. Roberts (1996) emphasized the crucial role of perceived effectiveness of one's actions for promoting environmentally friendly consumer choices. Various studies have demonstrated that greater perceived effectiveness of one's actions helps to translate people's concern for environmental protection into eco-friendly consumer choices (Axelrod & Lehman, 1993; Berger & Corbin, 1992; Grob, 1995; Lee & Holden, 1999; Thøgersen, 1999). Given the importance of perceived effectiveness in driving socially responsible behavior, understanding its antecedents becomes especially relevant. We argue that “sense of connectedness” is of central importance in that respect.

## 2. Sense of connectedness

We define “sense of connectedness” as the perceived unity and interdependence with others. Feeling connected to others is a fundamental psychological human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). People tend to feel connected to those with whom they share a group membership (Tajfel, 1982) or other, sometimes trivial attributes, such as a birthday (e.g., Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989). Moreover, individuals fundamentally differ in the extent to which they define themselves in terms of connectedness and interdependence with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A stronger sense of connectedness with others motivates striving to fit in social groups, fulfill one's social roles, and engage in actions that promote social harmony and respect for social norms (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Singelis, 1994).

Especially relevant in the context of this paper, the sense of connectedness to others is associated with greater salience of social values and of the collective good (Triandis, 1995; Utz, 2004). Previous studies have demonstrated a link between the sense of connectedness and self-reported environmental conservation behavior (Arnocky, Stroink, & DeCicco, 2007; McCarty & Shrum, 2001), recycling (McCarty & Shrum, 2001), and donations to charity (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005). Specifically directed at nature conservation, more recent work pointed at a similar role for *connectedness to nature* (Davis, Green, & Reed, 2009; Schultz, 2002). The implicit or explicit assumption in those studies has been that the causal mechanism underlying the effect of the sense of connectedness to others on behavior is a larger commitment to further the interest of the collective (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). We suggest that at least one other mechanism links the sense of connectedness and socially responsible behavior, and that mechanism involves the perceived effectiveness of one's actions.

When individuals feel connected to others, their sense of self is broadened to include others and the characteristics of self and others become shared, creating an overlap in cognitions about the self and others (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). The merging of self and others does not only occur in the context of close dyadic

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