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Don't be satisfied, identify! Strengthening positive spillover by connecting pro-environmental behaviors to an "environmentalist" label

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ABSTRACT

Theoretically, performing pro-environmental behaviors can lead to positive spillover (increased future pro-environmental behaviors or strengthened environmental attitudes) by increasing someone's acceptance of an environmental self-identity, or negative spillover by alleviating guilt motivations which fuel some environmental actions. Labeling someone an "environmentalist" in connection to performance of pro-environmental behaviors could strengthen the positive spillover route through emphasizing environmental self-identity rather than guilt reduction. In Study 1, participants perceiving that they performed many pro-environmental behaviors reported greater environmental self-identity strengthening their environmental attitudes, but simultaneously reported a reduction in guilt weakening their environmental attitudes. Since both positive spillover and negative spillover routes were active, there was not a significant total spillover effect from pro-environmental behavior to environmental attitudes. In Study 2, however, labeling those who perceived they performed many pro-environmental behaviors as "environmentalists" led to stronger environmental self-identity with no simultaneous reduction of guilt, increasing the total positive spillover.

1. Introduction

What is an environmentalist? Perhaps this is someone who bicycles to work, purchases produce from local farms, and avoids bottled water and Styrofoam at all costs. Maybe this person is also very concerned and vocal about climate change and is a supporter of renewable energy technologies. This description demonstrates that when a label such as "environmentalist" is applied to someone, it comes with a whole set of behavioral and attitudinal expectations. Similarly, when people come to identify as environmentalists, they can be motivated to live up to this same set of expectations. So how do people come to think of themselves as environmentalists?

1.1. Past behavior

One way is through performing pro-environmental behaviors. Self-perception theory suggests that we come to know ourselves the same way we get to know other people, by observing the implications of our own behaviors (Bem, 1972). Therefore, performing pro-environmental behaviors may lead people to see themselves as "environmentalists" or "green." Indeed, when people perceive that they have acted environmentally-friendly in the past, they are likely to report a stronger environmental self-identity (Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981; Poortinga, Whitmarsh, & Suffolk, 2013; van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2014a, 2014b) and greater moral obligation to continue acting environmentally-friendly (van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2013a).

A growing body of research has examined behavioral spillover, focusing on how the performance of a pro-environmental behavior influences someone's future environmental behaviors or environmental attitudes, such as policy support (Truelove, Carrico, Weber, Raimi, & Vandenbergh, 2014). Some research finds that people who perceive that they have acted environmentally-friendly in the past are more likely to perform other pro-environmental behaviors, indicating positive spillover from past behavior to future behaviors (Cornelissen, Pandelaere, Warlop, & Dewitte, 2008; Lanzini & Thøgersen, 2014; Thøgersen & Ölander, 2003; van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2013a, 2013b). Performance of pro-environmental

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behaviors can also lead to more positive attitudes towards environmental policies, indicating positive spillover from past behavior to environmental attitudes (Poortinga et al., 2013; Thøgersen & Noblet, 2012).

However, positive spillover is not consistently found. Performing pro-environmental behaviors sometimes has the opposite effect, making people feel less obligated to perform other pro-environmental behaviors (Klöckner, Nayum, & Mehmetoglu, 2013; Thøgersen & Ölander, 2003), and may actually lead them to increase their resource consumption (Tiefenbeck, Staake, Roth, & Sachs, 2013). Individuals may also point to past pro-environmental behaviors as an excuse to avoid performing other, more difficult behaviors (Diekmann & Preisendörfer, 1998). These cases of negative spillover can be explained by thinking about the motivations behind pro-environmental behaviors. Pro-environmental behaviors may be viewed as part of a contribution ethic, and once people perform one environmental "good deed," they feel justified slacking off on other environmental actions (Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009), or feel licensed to act immorally in the future (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Additionally, pro-environmental behaviors may often be performed for non-environmental reasons such as to save money (e.g., Evans et al., 2013) or to gain status (e.g., Griskevicius, Tybur, & van den Bergh, 2010). In these cases, there would be little expectation for spillover to other environmental behaviors or attitudes in either direction, since the individual is not linking their actions to environmental concerns in the first place.

Therefore, performing pro-environmental behaviors can lead to positive spillover (increase in future pro-environmental behaviors or strengthening of environmental attitudes) in some circumstances, and negative spillover (decrease in future pro-environmental behaviors and weakening of environmental attitudes) in others. Theoretically, performing pro-environmental behaviors can lead to positive spillover by increasing someone's acceptance of an environmental self-identity, or negative spillover by alleviating negative feelings such as guilt which fuel some environmental actions. (for a review, see Truelove et al., 2014). Thus, purposefully linking people's past pro-environmental behaviors to an environmental self-identity may increase the likelihood of positive spillover. One way to do this is through actively labeling people "environmentalists" in connection to their past behavior.

1.2. Labeling

Our self-identities, or the way we label ourselves, are impacted by our personal values and beliefs, but also by our social interactions including the expectations or labels we receive from others (Gatersleben, Murtagh, & Abrahamse, 2014; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). If someone accepts a label that they receive from others, this can create an expectation for the self to behave in ways consistent with that label. For example, research specifically examining the behavioral effects of receiving trait labels such as "helpful" or "tidy" found that these labels led people to perform behaviors congruent with the label (Burger & Caldwell, 2003; Goldman, Seever, & Seever, 1982; Miller, Brickman, & Bolen, 1975). In terms of environmental labels, one study found that when people were labeled "very concerned with the environment, and ecologically conscious" after making an eco-friendly purchasing decision, they were more likely to choose other eco-friendly products on a subsequent purchasing task (Cornelissen, Dewitte, Warlop, & Yzerbyt, 2007).

Similarly, labeling people "environmentalists" should directly strengthen their environmental self-identity, defined as the extent to which you view yourself as the kind of person who acts environmentally-friendly (van der Werff et al., 2013b). Although the research on environmentalist labeling is scarce, environmental self-identity has been found to be an important factor when examining whether pro-environmental behaviors will lead to positive spillover. Indeed, environmental self-identity is a predictor of pro-environmental behaviors and environmental attitudes such as purchasing environmentally-friendly products, switching to green energy, making energy-saving transportation choices, and supporting environmental political policies (Bannon, DeBell, Krosnick, Kopp, & Aldhous, 2007; Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981; Gatersleben et al., 2014; van der Werff et al., 2013b, 2013a; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Environmental self-identity can also help explain the link between people's personal pro-environmental behaviors and their environmental political attitudes (Lacasse, 2015), and a slightly more specific "environmental activist" self-identity can predict environmental activism behaviors (Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008).

Certainly, the term "environmentalist" is a bit loaded and does not have universally positive connotations. For example, one study found that college students described environmentalists as more eccentric and militant, and less personable than typical students (Bashir, Lockwood, Chasteen, Nadolny, & Noyes, 2013). However, students only expressed reduced interest in affiliating with an environmentalist who attended protests and rallies, but were still interested in affiliating with an environmentalist who helped raised money for grassroots environmental groups. Therefore, it seems that the negative connotations are more related to a specific type of activist-environmentalist, but not necessarily connected to environmentalists who perform more conventional pro-environmental behaviors. For this reason, the term "environmentalist" as applied to someone after they perform conventional pro-environmental behaviors may often be interpreted positively.

1.3. Guilt

On the other hand, emotional responses stemming from perception of one's own past pro-environmental behaviors can also motivate future pro-environmental behaviors and attitudes. Specifically, people may feel guilty if they perceive they are failing to act environmentally-friendly. Guilt is often a significant factor in people's decisions to perform pro-environmental behaviors (for a meta-analysis, see Bamberg & Möser, 2007). Being reminded of past environmentally harmful behaviors can lead people to perform more pro-environmental behaviors (Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992; Kantola, Syme, & Campbell, 1984; Osbaldiston & Schott, 2012), and being reminded of how one's ingroup is involved in environmental degradation leads to feelings of guilt, which in turn predicts willingness to repair damage caused by the group, to conserve energy, or even to pay green taxes (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010; Harth, Leach, & Kessler, 2013). However, once a pro-environmental behavior is performed, the guilty feeling may be alleviated, and thereby the motivation to perform additional pro-environmental behaviors can be reduced as well. Indeed, one study found that feeling guilt predicted performance of a pro-environmental behavior in the moment, but did not predict performance of pro-environmental behavior 2.5 hours later (Bissing-Olson, Fielding, & Iyer, 2016) Therefore, if an initial pro-environmental behavior is motivated by guilt, negative spillover is a likely consequence.

1.4. Current research

Two experimental studies were conducted to examine how perception of one's past pro-environmental behaviors may spillover into their environmental attitudes. The environmental attitudes examined were (1) concern about a specific environmental