



Predicting individual differences in the choice of strategy to compensate for attitude-behaviour inconsistencies in the environmental domain



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ABSTRACT

This research examined how people resolve inconsistencies between their pro-environmental attitudes and their counter-environmental actions. Using the action-based model and self-determination theory, we hypothesized that people use either behaviour modification (BM; e.g., counter-balancing the impact of counter-environmental actions) or cognitive restructuring (CR; e.g., trivializing pro-environmental attitudes) strategies to compensate for such inconsistencies and that the choice of strategy depends on people's levels of autonomous and controlled motivation toward the environment (MTE). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, as well as multi-sample path analyses of self-reported data supported hypotheses. Autonomous MTE was associated with the use of BM and the avoidance of CR strategies both to reduce dissonance and to compensate for counter-environmental actions. Controlled MTE was associated with the use of BM strategies to reduce dissonance but with the use of CR strategies to minimize non-threatening inconsistencies. Implications for the environmental belief-action gap and for environmental sustainability efforts are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Canadians are increasingly concerned about the environment (Institute for Social Research, 2007; 2009) but continue to drive to work, to consume large amounts of fresh water resources, and to cram landfills and incinerators with waste (Environment Canada, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2008; 2012). This environmental belief-action gap implies that Canadians are likely to act against their own pro-environmental attitudes on a day-to-day basis (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). This is troubling because the choice of strategy to deal with attitude-behaviour inconsistencies presumably has implications for environmental protection efforts. Resolving the inconsistency by changing or compensating for harmful actions should bolster pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour, which has the potential to alleviate the gap. Conversely, resolving the inconsistency by deprecating pro-environmental attitudes or

justifying harmful actions should reinforce counter-environmental behaviour, which may exacerbate the gap. Therefore, there is a need to understand individual differences in the use of inconsistency compensation strategies.

1.1. Inconsistency compensation strategies

According to cognitive dissonance theory (CDT; Festinger, 1957), when people hold two conflicting or dissonant cognitions simultaneously, an aversive intrapersonal state of cognitive dissonance is aroused. The aroused dissonance then motivates them to compensate for the inconsistency in order to reduce the psychological discomfort. CDT distinguishes between two approaches, direct versus indirect, to compensate for aversive attitude-behaviour inconsistencies and reduce dissonance (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1999).

Direct dissonance reduction or compensation strategies consist of categorically changing or eliminating one of the dissonant cognitions directly responsible for the inconsistency (Festinger, 1957). This consists of reversing the initial attitude position, called attitude change, or eliminating the *physical trace* of the behaviour,

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called behaviour change. Indirect dissonance reduction or compensation strategies consist of distorting or restructuring cognitions that are not directly responsible for the inconsistency. In other words, they involve the use of selective elaboration strategies to minimize the dissonance ratio, which is the total number of relevant dissonant cognitions relative to the total number of all relevant dissonant and consonant cognitions weighted by their perceived importance (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1999). Selective elaboration consists of removing or minimizing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or of adding or maximizing the importance of consonant cognitions (Festinger, 1957). Indirect compensation strategies include trivialization that consists of minimizing the importance of dissonant attitudes, rationalization that involves justifying the behavioural transgression, and behaviour modification that consists of enacting a compensatory pro-attitudinal action. Inconsistency compensation strategies lie on a continuum of elaboration that require increasingly more self-regulatory resources to implement (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1999). In order of increasing elaboration, they include passive forgetting (i.e., inaction), attitude change, trivialization, rationalization, behaviour modification, and behaviour change.

In principle, direct compensation strategies are most effective because they directly eliminate the inconsistency. However, in practice, it is reasonable to assume that people are more likely to make gradual versus categorical changes to their attitudes. In fact, most CDT research that uses 'attitude change' as the dependent variable usually reports a weakening of attitudes (i.e., less extreme attitude position) similar to trivialization. Likewise, research that relies on 'behaviour change' outcomes usually operationalizes them as intentions to enact or as the enactment of a new pro-attitudinal action, a strategy similar to behaviour modification. Presumably, this is because actions leave a physical trace which is often difficult or impossible to reverse or eliminate categorically (Festinger, 1957). This suggests that the conceptual distinctions between the compensation strategies identified in the literature may be a methodological artefact due to the pervasive use of dissonance induction paradigms that offer a limited number of strategies to compensate for an experimentally induced inconsistency. For this same reason, dissonance researchers know little about which strategy or strategies people are likely to use to compensate for spontaneous attitude-behaviour inconsistencies encountered in day-to-day life. Specifically, inconsistencies that arise in everyday situations when several compensation strategies are available and people are free to use the strategy they prefer.

Fortunately, the action-based model (Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones, 2009) proposes an alternative account of the motivation underlying dissonance phenomena, which facilitates predictions about individual differences in the choice of compensation strategies.

1.2. Motivation to compensate

The action-based model is a contemporary theory of dissonance, which proposes that there are two types of motivation operating during dissonance processes: proximal motivation and distal motivation (Harmon-Jones et al., 2009). Proximal motivation refers to the dissonance aroused by cognitions with opposing or discordant action tendencies that threaten effective action in important life domains. Once aroused, this motivation drives or impels people to use a compensation strategy to avoid or minimize the psychological discomfort. Distal motivation refers to the dominant behavioural commitments or goals elicited by conflicting cognitions. This motivation leads people to engage in compensatory actions that have the potential to fulfil these salient commitments and goals, thereby restoring effective action (Harmon-Jones et al.,

2009). Like CDT (Festinger, 1957), the action-based model proposes that the dissonance spontaneously aroused by a perceived inconsistency motivates people to compensate for the inconsistency, but it also advances the novel proposition that the choice of compensation strategy depends, in part, on action tendencies activated or elicited by the inconsistency. Therefore, Harmon-Jones et al. (2009) have argued that individual differences in dominant action tendencies have better predictive power relative to choices between compensation strategies than do differences in the domain's perceived importance (i.e., CDT; Festinger, 1957). However, the action-based model does not theorize about the nature or the source of individual differences in distal motivation.

In the context of the present research, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) was used to operationalize the concept of distal motivation. Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation that allows for clear predictions about the behavioural commitments and goals likely to guide behaviour in a given life domain, such as the environmental protection domain. The theory distinguishes between autonomous and controlled motivations toward the environment (Pelletier, Tuson, Green-Demers, Noels, & Beaton, 1998), which correspond to the manifestation of distinct causality orientations, or action tendencies, in the environmental domain (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

1.2.1. Autonomous motivation

Autonomous motivation toward the environment (MTE) is the manifestation of the innate action tendency to orient toward and interact with the social environment to facilitate organismic integration (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These integrative action tendencies dispose people to act in ways that increase the coherence and consistence of their authentic self-structures (e.g., beliefs, values, attitudes)—that is, facilitate organismic integration—in important life domains (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Therefore, people who exhibit autonomous MTE tend to engage in pro-environmental behaviour because they believe environmental protection is important, because their pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours are integral to their sense of self, or because such behaviour is inherently satisfying (Pelletier et al., 1998). As a result, autonomous MTE is reliably associated with strong, self-relevant pro-environmental attitudes, and with numerous, frequent, and persistent pro-environmental behaviours (see Pelletier, Baxter, & Huta, 2011 for a review).

1.2.2. Controlled motivation

Controlled MTE is the manifestation of the acquired action tendency to orient toward and interact with the social environment to facilitate desirable instrumental outcomes contingent on behaviour, for example to obtain rewards or to avoid punishments (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These contingent action tendencies uphold ego-invested self-structures, such as desires for status and prestige or feelings of self-worth, which are contingent on the approval of others (Ryan & Deci, 2004). People who exhibit controlled MTE might engage in pro-environmental behaviour to obtain a tax rebate or to garner the praise of others, or to avoid getting a municipal fine or being the object of criticism. In line with these propositions, controlled motivation is not reliably associated with strong pro-environmental attitudes or with indicators of pro-environmental behavioural engagement, especially as the level of perceived difficulty of the behaviour increases (see Pelletier et al., 2011 for a review).

The theoretical and empirical distinctions between autonomous and controlled MTE suggest that the two types of distal motivation guide behaviour toward the satisfaction of different behavioural commitments and goals—organismic integration and ego-protection, respectively. Therefore, accounting for individual differences in MTE could facilitate predictions about the use and

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