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Going the extra green mile: When others' actions fall short of their responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined whether the environmental responsibility and actions attributed to large scale organizations, such as the government, can influence people's environmental efforts. In particular, we examined whether people increase or decrease their willingness to enact energy conservation behaviors (ECB) when there is a shortfall between others' actions and their responsibility. In Studies 1 and 2 we found that willingness to enact ECB was positively correlated with judgements about each of the organizations' eco-responsibility but not their eco-actions. Interestingly, each of the organizations' actions were perceived as falling short of their responsibility and this shortfall was positively associated with willingness to enact ECB. In Study 3, we found that manipulating respondents perceptions of government shortfall increased participants' willingness to enact ECB. Overall our findings provide support for social compensation theory as when others actions fall short of their responsibility people are prepared to "go the extra green mile".

1. Introduction

Environmental campaigns and policy initiatives often attempt to influence people's behaviors (DEFRA, 2008; Owens, 2000). For example, a discussion paper from the UK cabinet office argued that in striving for green behaviors, "the eventual aim is to entrench a habit of personal responsibility" (2004, p.5). However, while the onus appears to be on individuals there are other key actors or agents who also have a role to play in energy conservation such as firms, communities, governments, and international organizations (see Stern, 1992). Yet, to date, this wider social context has typically been overlooked in psychological research. Consequently, it remains to be seen if people's willingness to enact Energy Conservation Behaviors (ECB) is influenced by (a) the responsibility ascribed to others to conserve energy, (b) the actions others are seen to be taking and, (c) incidences in which other agents' responsibility to conserve energy falls short of their perceived eco-actions.

1.1. The influence of other organizations on individual environmental efforts

We propose that people's actions are influenced by collective dynamics, such that individuals look to others (including larger organizations) when setting their own behavior standards. We suggest this on the basis that people do not operate in a social and political vacuum; rather they are aware that other organizations and entities have a role to play in energy conservation. Indeed, in several qualitative studies it has emerged that people consider a number of organizations to be responsible for environmental efforts (Barr, Gilg, & Shaw, 2011; Hargreaves, Nye, & Burgess., 2013; Hinchlifffe, 1996; Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, & Whitmarsh, 2007). Interestingly, such findings emerged despite the fact that the majority of these qualitative studies did not seek to examine the role of other agents in environmental behaviors - which suggests that such perceptions may be pervasive. Moreover, it is likely that these perceptions are fostered by the media which frequently provides commentary on the environmental efforts of a variety of agents and institutions. For example, in April 2014 the UK was hit by high levels of air pollution caused by a combination of local emissions, light winds, pollution from the continent, and dust from the Sahara. News articles were quick to acknowledge that such pollution could bring further attention to the, "government's long-term failure to reduce air pollution" (BBC, 2014). As such it is clear that a person's

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environmental action is situated in a broader set of social relations that need to be taken into consideration (see also Catney et al., 2013).

1.2. Responsibility

The link between personal responsibility and willingness to enact or support ECB has been established in a multitude of research studies (e.g., Guagnano, Dietz, & Stern, 1994; Hines, Hungerford, & Tomara, 1987; Hunecke, Blobaum, Matthies, & Hoger, 2001; Jansson, Marell, & Nordlund, 2010; Kaiser, Ranney, Hartig, & Bowler, 1999; Kaiser & Shimoda, 1999; Nordlund & Garvill, 2002; Steg, Dreijerink, & Abrahamse, 2005). In contrast, far less is known about the relationship between ascriptions of environmental responsibility to other agents and personal willingness to enact ECB. Yet, it is apparent from both quantitative and qualitative studies, that individuals are aware that other agents, such as their neighbours, the government, corporate bodies (e.g., city council, offices) and multinationals, have a role to play in energy conservation (e.g., Hargreaves, Nye, & Burgess, 2010; Hinchliffe, 1996; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Stern, Dietz, & Black, 1985). However, it remains to be seen how these perceptions of others' environmental obligations influence people's own environmental efforts. According to the bystander effect, we might expect a diffusion of responsibility to occur and individuals to be less inclined to help by enacting ECB when responsibility is distributed among several others (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970; Latané & Nida, 1981). Yet, on the other hand, if individuals consider both themselves and others responsible for energy conservation this may foster a sense of shared responsibility, such that willingness to enact ECB is positively influenced by ascriptions of responsibility to others.

1.3. Action

Past research suggests that social norms play a pervasive role in an individual's willingness to enact ECB (e.g., Barr et al., 2011; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990, Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; McDonald, Fielding, & Louis, 2013; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Typically, marketing campaigns use social norms to try and influence people's behaviors by changing perceptions of what is considered normal (descriptive norms) or socially acceptable (injunctive norms). For instance, researchers found that hotel guests were significantly more likely to re-use their towels when presented with the following normative appeal, "Join your fellow guests in helping to save the environment", than when presented with the message, "Help save the environment" (Goldstein et al., 2008). Social norms can also lead people to act in ways that are detrimental to the environment. For example, people are more likely to litter in littered environments, and this effect is even more pronounced if they have witnessed another person drop litter (Cialdini et al., 1990 Experiment 1). As such, there is substantial support for the idea that people may enact either more or less ECB depending on what others are (or are not) doing. However, typically norms have been examined at the individual level and, to the best of our knowledge; there is currently no research that examines if the norms of larger social organizations (e.g., the government, energy suppliers) influence personal environmental efforts. On the one hand, the environmental actions that an organization takes (or does not take) may set an important precedent (i.e., it may act as a norm), especially given the position of power these organizations may hold. Yet, on the other hand, people may not consider the actions of larger organizations as relevant if they perceive that they are operating on a substantially different level from themselves.

1.4. Considering responsibility and action together

We propose that in order to understand if the wider social context contributes to intentions to enact eco-behaviors it is necessary to consider both perceptions of others' eco-responsibilities, and others' eco-actions. This is because while responsibility and action are distinct and separable from one another they are also clearly related. This relation stems from their definition. Specifically, responsibility is defined as, "the state or fact of having a duty to deal with something …", while action is defined as, "the fact or process of doing something". In other words, responsibility is about "what we ought to be doing" whereas action is about "what we are actually doing". Thus when people think about responsibility it is likely that they also consider action. Of course, this does not mean that the two inevitably co-occur in an applied setting. Rather, it is possible to be responsible for something but not to take action and vice versa. However, given the operational links between responsibility and action there are two good reasons for considering the dual influence of both factors on intentions to enact ECB. First, considering action without responsibility may render the influence of action irrelevant. If an agent is not considered responsible for conserving energy then their actions or inactions are irrelevant and may have little bearing on our own actions. Second, considering action alongside responsibility provides the basis for moral judgements to be made about whether other agents are meeting their environmental responsibilities. As such, considering both responsibility and action together enables us to address an important and hitherto unanswered research question: to what extent are others' actions seen as matching their responsibility and in cases where others' action are perceived as falling short of their responsibility how does this influence personal willingness to enact ECB? In the present paper we refrain from making specific predictions about whether perceptions of others' shortfall will lead to either an increase or decrease in willingness to enact ECB. We argue that to do so would be inappropriate given that there are psychological mechanisms that can be used to infer support for either possibility. Specifically, when confronted with others' shortfall, the sucker effect and feelings of personal inefficacy may explain why people will decrease their efforts; whereas social compensation theory may explain why people will increase their efforts.

1.4.1. Doing less: running a mile

The 'sucker effect' describes a phenomenon that occurs when individuals experience motivation loss when they suspect that capable others are not contributing (Kerr, 1983). There is some indication from qualitative studies that the sucker effect may occur in response to perceptions that powerful organizations are failing to meet their environmental responsibilities (Barr et al., 2011; Hinchliffe, 1996). For example, one interviewee observed, "But it is discouraging when you hear … that places like America won't sign up to the Kyoto agreement … That's just pushing us into thinking, 'well, why should we bother?'" (Barr et al., 2011, p.716), while another interviewee commented, "I am one person and you think, well why am I going to change my lifestyle if all these other people aren't? It's human nature" (Lorenzoni et al., 2007, p.451).

Diminished feelings of personal efficacy or perceived helplessness may also lead individuals to do less when others' actions fall short of their responsibility. Personal efficacy refers to "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." (Bandura, 1995, p.2). We suggest that individuals' personal efficacy may be undermined in the face of powerful global entities failing to live up to their