



Review

An Integrated Framework for Encouraging Pro-environmental Behaviour: The role of values, situational factors and goals



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ABSTRACT

Many environmental behaviours involve a conflict between hedonic and gain goals versus normative goals; people often need to incur some costs to benefit the environment. Based on this assumption, we propose an integrated theoretical framework for understanding behaviour change that identifies two routes to encourage pro-environmental behaviour. First, the conflict between goals can be reduced by decreasing the (hedonic and gain) costs of pro-environmental choices. Although this route is important when pro-environmental choices are very costly, it may not result in sustained pro-environmental actions. Second, normative goals can be strengthened. This strategy may encourage pro-environmental actions, even when it is somewhat costly. We propose that the strength of normative goals depends on values and situational factors that influence the accessibility of these values. We discuss theoretical implications of our reasoning, and indicate how the integrated framework adopted in this paper may advance theory development and environmental policy making.

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1. Introduction

The world is facing serious environmental problems related to, amongst others, global warming, urban air pollution, and scarcity of safe drinking water. These problems are, at least partly, rooted in human behaviour (DuNann Winter & Koger, 2004; Gardner & Stern, 2002; Vlek & Steg, 2007), and can thus be managed by changing the relevant behaviours so as to promote environmental quality. But how can we encourage individuals to engage in pro-environmental actions? Which motivations can best be targeted to promote behavioural changes? And what role do situational factors play in this process? There is much research on factors influencing behaviour and on effective ways to change behaviour. However, this research is not tied together in a comprehensive theoretical framework. Moreover, there seem to be conflicting views on what is the most effective strategy for behaviour change. This paper presents a theoretical framework, the Integrated Framework for Encouraging Pro-Environmental Behaviour (IFEP) that allows a more comprehensive and detailed study of the variables and processes that play a role in effective pro-environmental behaviour change.

1.1. The Integrated Framework for Encouraging Pro-Environmental Behaviour (IFEP)

As point of departure for the IFEP, we suggest that environmental behaviour often involves a conflict between different goals a person pursues. Goal framing theory (Lindenberg & Steg, 2007) suggests that three different types of goals (or motivations) govern environmental behaviour in a given situation¹: hedonic goals, gain goals, and normative goals. Hedonic goals lead individuals to focus on ways to improve their feelings in a particular situation, such as avoiding effort, seeking direct pleasure or seeking excitement. Gain goals prompt people particularly to be sensitive to changes in their personal resources, such as money and status. Normative goals lead people to focus on the appropriateness of actions and make them especially sensitive to what they think they ought to do, such as contributing to a clean environment, or showing exemplary behaviour. These three goals steer attention and influence which information people detect, what knowledge is cognitively most accessible, what action alternatives are perceived, and how people will act in a specific situation. The goal that is strongest or

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¹ We define environmental behaviour (or actions) by its impact, that is, as any action that affects the quality of the environment, in either a positive or negative way, either resulting or not resulting from pro-environmental intent. We define pro-environmental behaviour as any action that enhances the quality of the environment, either resulting or not resulting from pro-environmental intent.

focal in a given situation (i.e., the 'goal-frame') will most strongly influence cognitive processes and decision making, while the other goals at the background increase (when they are compatible with the goal frame) or decrease (when they conflict with the goal frame) the strength of the focal goal. The changes of goals strength across situations are mostly not a conscious process; goals may be strengthened by individual dispositions and by subtle cues (as will be explained below) without individuals being aware of them (see also [Lindenberg, 2012](#); [Steg, 2012](#)).

In principle, people may be motivated to engage in pro-environmental behaviour for hedonic reasons (e.g., because it is enjoyable), for gain reasons (e.g., because it saves money), or for normative reasons (e.g., because they think protecting the environment is the right thing to do). Yet, as suggested above, many (but not all, as we will explain later) pro-environmental actions involve a conflict between normative goals on the one hand, and hedonic and gain goals, on the other hand (e.g., [Lindenberg & Steg, 2007](#); [Nordlund & Garvill, 2003](#); [Samuelson, 1990](#); [Steg, Dreijerink, & Abrahamse, 2005](#); [Steg & Nordlund, 2012](#)). Although acting pro-environmentally is often considered to be the appropriate thing to do, it is in many cases less profitable, less pleasurable, more time-consuming or more effortful than environmentally-harmful actions. Organic products, for instance, are often more expensive than regular products, and using public transport is perceived as less convenient, slower and less pleasurable than travelling by car ([Steg, 2003](#)). Yet, buying organic products or using public transport will typically be considered as appropriate behaviours as they have a less negative impact on the environment.²

How can we encourage individuals to engage in pro-environmental actions, given this goal conflict? Our IFEP framework suggests two basic strategies to encourage pro-environmental actions. First, the actual or perceived outcomes of environmental behaviour can be changed, as to reduce or even remove the conflict between hedonic and gain goals, on the one hand, and normative goals, on the other. More specifically, the perceived costs (in a broad sense, including time, convenience, effort, money, comfort, etc.) of pro-environmental behaviour can be reduced, while its perceived benefits can be increased. For example, pro-environmental actions can be made (to be perceived as) more convenient, fun, cheaper or less effortful as to make such actions more attractive, even when hedonic and gain goals are focal. Similarly, costs and benefits of environmentally-harmful actions can be changed, as to make these options relatively less attractive. This strategy is commonly being applied in environmental behaviour research, by, for example, implementing information campaigns, pricing policies, or physical changes in the environment. A second, and to our knowledge novel, strategy is to strengthen normative goals, thereby weakening the relative strength of hedonic and gain goals. This approach will make people focus on the environmental outcomes of behavioural choices, which can encourage them to act pro-environmentally because they want to do the right thing, even though such actions may be somewhat less convenient or more costly. This strategy will not remove the conflict between normative and the other two goals, but rather make

the conflict less prominent by reducing the value that people attach to hedonic and gain consequences of behaviour.³

In this paper, we elaborate on the IFEP framework and discuss to what extent and via which processes both strategies may result in sustained and robust pro-environmental actions. We also discuss why the adoption of the second strategy may encourage individuals to engage in pro-environmental actions even when these activities are associated with some personal costs, thereby testifying the relevance of this novel strategy to encourage pro-environmental actions. We first discuss briefly strategies that primarily target hedonic and gain considerations by reducing the (hedonic and gain) costs of pro-environmental behaviour, and identify some possible risks of exclusively relying on such strategies. Second, we elaborate on ways to strengthen normative goals. More specifically, we discuss to what extent normative considerations are an important predictor of pro-environmental behaviour, how they affect such behaviour, and whether pro-environmental actions can be promoted by targeting normative considerations. We will demonstrate that the strength of normative goals depends on individual factors (in particular biospheric values), as well as situational factors (that is, situational cues that activate or deactivate different types of values) that are generally overlooked in environmental behaviour research. Third, we explain that in some situations hedonic or gain goals can dovetail rather than conflict with normative goals. This possibility implies that pro-environmental actions can be promoted by explicitly linking hedonic and gain goals to normative goals, as far as doing the right thing can also make people feel good or increase their resources. Finally, we present the main conclusions, discuss theoretical and practical implications of the IFEP framework, and identify important topics for future research.

2. Making hedonic and gain goals compatible with normative goals

A first way to encourage pro-environmental actions is to reduce or even remove the conflict between normative goals, on the one hand, and hedonic and gain goals, on the other. By doing so, people would act pro-environmentally even when hedonic or gain goals are focal (and normative goals are relatively weak), for example because it is pleasurable or saves money. Examples include making pro-environmental products financially attractive via subsidies, increasing costs of environmentally-harmful actions via taxes, making pro-environmental actions fun (e.g., [thefuntheory.com](#)) or convenient (e.g., by increasing the availability of trash cans), or by making environmentally-harmful options less pleasurable (e.g., by implementing speed humps). Such interventions can be aimed at changing the actual costs and benefits (e.g., via pricing instrument, legal regulations, or physical changes; see [Bolderdijk, Lehman, & Geller, 2012](#); [Geller, 2002](#); [Steg & Vlek, 2009](#)) or the perceived costs and benefits of behavioural options (e.g., via information or persuasion strategies; cf. [Steg & Vlek, 2009](#)). For example, information can be provided on financial consequences of choices, thereby correcting possible misperceptions (e.g., [Abrahamse & Matthies, 2012](#)).

This route to promoting pro-environmental actions may be a necessary condition for behaviour change in some cases, particularly when environmentally-harmful options are much more

² This conflict between hedonic and gain goals on the one hand, and normative goals on the other hand has often been characterised as a social dilemma ([Dawes & Messick, 2000](#); [Vlek, 1996](#)). Indeed, many environmental choices involve a large-scale social dilemma, that is, a conflict between individual interests (which are reflected in hedonic and gain goals) in the short term and collective interests (which are reflected in normative goals) in the long term. Many environmental problems will be significantly reduced only when many people collaborate, and as a consequence, individuals may hardly feel responsible for and capable of reducing these problems. This may inhibit individuals to act in the collective interest.

³ Theoretically, goal conflicts could also be resolved by reducing the strength of normative goals, which will reduce the importance of environmental outcomes in choices made. We do not elaborate on this possibility, as this strategy would inhibit rather than encourage pro-environmental actions; this paper focuses on how to encourage pro-environmental actions.

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