



Consideration of future consequences and pro-environmental decision making in the context of persuasion and binding commitment



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ABSTRACT

Based on the ABC model, which postulates that behavior (B) is a product of the interaction between attitudinal variables (A) and contextual factors (C), we studied the influence of social context on the effects of consideration of future consequences (CFC) within the framework of decision making about a pro-environmental behavior. The role of the external situation on the relationship between CFC and the studied behavior was observed through three types of situation: No-communication, persuasive communication and binding communication. The results showed a global effect of CFC on decision making with a moderating effect of the context: CFC had no effect in the least favoring condition (no-communication) nor in the most favoring condition (binding communication). We only observed an effect of CFC in the intermediate condition (persuasive communication). These results confirm the ABC model and highlight the value of taking account of the contextual factors in studying a psychological variable such as CFC.

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1. Introduction

According to recent research, a future time orientation is associated with an increased incidence of pro-environmental behaviors (Milfont & Gouveia, 2006; Rabinovich, Morton, & Postmes, 2010). This could be explained by the fact that the uncertainties associated with environmental issues (the extent of climatic disturbance, the depletion of natural resources, demographic growth, etc.) necessarily involve expectations and projections into the future (Joireman, 2005). Indeed, behaviors affecting the environment have, for the most part, a deferred impact whose consequences are not felt until several decades later (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002; Milfont, 2010).

1.1. Consideration of future consequences and the environment

Individuals differ in the way in which they foresee the consequences of their acts, some focusing on the long term consequences, while others do not see beyond the immediate consequences. Based on this observation, Strathman, Gleicher,

Boninger, and Scott Edwards (1994) developed the concept of consideration of future consequences (CFC) and its associated measurement scale (Strathman et al., 1994). Individuals who obtained a high score on the CFC¹ scale ("high CFCs") were more concerned about environmental problems, had pro-environmental attitudes, and stated that they either followed, or intended to follow to a greater extent, "eco-friendly" patterns of behavior (Ebreo & Vining, 2001; Joireman, Lasane, Bennett, Richards, & Solaimani, 2001; Joireman, Van Lange, & Van Vugt, 2004; Strathman et al., 1994). In addition, high CFCs tend to be more cooperative and to take the collective interest more into account in experimental dilemma situations where they have to manage fictitious natural resources (Joireman, Posey, Truelove, & Parks, 2009; Kortenkamp & Moore, 2006; Strathman et al., 1994).

1.2. Studying the links between CFC and context: the ABC model

CFC is usually presented in these studies as a stable and trans-situational variable, generally seen as a moderator, either of the impact of some other factor within the individual (such as perceived environmental consequences; Joireman et al., 2004) or of a feature of the situation that has been manipulated (such as the

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¹ A high score indicates a strong tendency to focus on the future consequences of their acts in making behavioral choices rather than focusing on immediate consequences.

framing of environmental or health messages; Orbell & Hagger, 2006; Strathman et al., 1994). The relevance of CFC in the study of pro-environmental behaviors has been emphasized in the literature. However, relation to time and its influence on decision making is not only determined by relatively stable inter-individual differences, acquired via cultural and social factors, but also by characteristics of the context (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

Currently, the idea of a dynamic interactive relation between people and their environment is widely spread in social psychology, notably in the study of pro-environmental behaviors. Indeed, it is well established that the weight of psychosocial factors in the setting up of pro-environmental behaviors varies in relation to the weight of contextual factors (Corraliza & Berenguer, 2000; Derksen & Gartrell, 1993; Steg & Vlek, 2009). In this context, the role of behavioral difficulty in moderating attitude–behavior relationships is still debated. According to Kaiser and Schultz (2009), two distinct sets of results can be identified: first, studies which highlight a strong link between attitude and behavior when situational constraints are low and when the behavior is relatively easy to carry out (Black, Stern, & Elworth, 1985). Second, studies which have demonstrated how attitudes strongly predicted difficult and costly behaviors (Schultz & Oskamp, 1996). An attempt to go beyond these two seemingly opposing sets of results has led to the development of a theoretical model suggesting that the attitude–behavior association is a curvilinear function of the strength of the external conditions (Guagnano, Stern, & Dietz, 1995; Stern, 2000).

The ABC model is a formalization of this latter idea, which postulates that behavior (B) is a product of the interaction between personal-sphere attitudinal variables (A) – including norms, beliefs and values – and contextual factors (C) (Guagnano et al., 1995). In this model, psychological variables will not predict behavior in contexts where action is either extremely difficult or extremely easy. For instance, in their study about curbside recycling, Guagnano et al. observed that the Schwartz norm-activation model did not predict recycling behavior for households equipped with plastic bins provided by the local authorities.

A comparison of 25 pro-environmental behaviors (from 5 studies based on survey data) partially validated the model (Kaiser & Schultz, 2009): a curvilinear relationship was found between behavioral difficulty and the strength of the attitude–behavior link (quadratic effect) which was no longer observed when “extreme” behaviors (with engagement proportion greater than 95% or smaller than 5%) were excluded from the analyses. Though we should be cautious when interpreting this latter result, as the authors have mentioned methodological issues that could explain their findings, other evidence in favor of the ABC model can be found in the literature. For instance, a before-and-after longitudinal study confirmed that the link between attitude and behavior was effectively influenced by the implementation of a waste collection system, as predicted by the model (Ölander & Thøgersen, 2006). More precisely, the modification of the attitude–behavior relationship depended on prior structural conditions. Indeed, attitude was a stronger determinant of source separation of compostable kitchen waste after the intervention in households with no gardens. In this situation, households experienced a transition from a very restrictive situation to a fairly restrictive one, as waste separation was made easier but not effortless. The change was smaller in households with a garden, where structural conditions were not that much improved.

In the current study we wanted to know if the ABC model could be extended to the consideration of future consequences, another psychological variable. Indeed, it seems relevant to study the influence of external conditions on the effects of CFC within the framework of decision making about pro-environmental behaviors. Using the same reasoning as for attitudinal variables, we tested

whether external conditions could act as a potential moderator variable on the link between CFC and decision making, at least in some social situations. As emphasized by Guagnano et al. (1995), “external conditions are conceived of broadly to include all external sources of support or opposition to behavior, whether physical, financial, legal, or social” (p. 702). While most of the studies have focused on physical conditions, we suggest here enlarging “C” to social influence, as another way to investigate the situational strength.

1.3. Variation of external conditions: persuasive vs. binding communication

Psychological variables are hypothesized to predict behavior only in intermediate external conditions (Guagnano et al., 1995). In order to evaluate the moderating influence of social context and this specific hypothesis, we compared decision making in three contexts which varied the weight of external conditions. We focused on a particular kind of contextual force, interpersonal influence, representing different levels of facilitation. We chose two social communication situations, one involving persuasion and one involving a binding commitment, as well as a neutral situation without influence.

As a moderate facilitation of pro-environmental decision making, we used a standard persuasive communication situation. Persuasive communication situations are often used by governmental organisms and ecological associations. But, even if persuasive communication enables us to influence environmental attitudes (Bator & Cialdini, 2000; Staats, Wit, & Midden, 1996), there is still inconsistency between expressed attitudes and actual behavior, at least for costly behaviors (Diekmann & Preisendoerfer, 1992; Jensen, 2002).

To increase the level of facilitation, we used a binding commitment communication that differs from a persuasive communication by the inexpensive act that participants are requested to perform before they are exposed to a persuasive message (Joule, Bernard, Geissler, Girandola, & Halimi-Falkowicz, 2010; Joule, Bernard, & Halimi-Falkowicz, 2008; Joule, Girandola, & Bernard, 2007). In order to facilitate decision making, this commitment-based procedure, called binding communication, aims to bring together in the same research paradigm studies performed in the field of persuasive communication and those conducted in the paradigm of compliance in situations of free choice (Joule et al., 2007). If persuasion enables us to influence attitudes, compliance in situations of free choice, and notably the foot-in-the-door technique (Burger, 1999; Freedman & Fraser, 1966), enables us to obtain significant behavioral effects in the environmental domain (Lokhorst, Werner, Staats, van Dijk, & Gale, 2013). Moreover, in a recent meta-analysis based on 19 studies, Lokhorst et al. (2013) showed that commitment making was especially effective when it was combined with other interventions. In the case of binding communication, the exposition to a persuasive message is systematically preceded by a first inexpensive act. The act must be, according to consistency theories, consistent with the position defended in the message. For instance, if the message promotes waste separation, participants are requested to wear a badge that promotes waste separation just before they read the message. After that, the final request, which is more costly, is expressed. The originality of the binding commitment communication paradigm is to confer the status of “target” on the actor rather than that of a mere passive receiver (Joule et al., 2010). Much research, notably in the area of eco-citizenry, have demonstrated that binding communication is more effective than persuasive communication in eliciting changes in behaviors (Joule et al., 2008, 2010). Through the manipulation of commitment factors, we

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