



Analysis

How Green Self Image is Related to Subjective Well-Being: Pro-Environmental Values as a Social Norm

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ARTICLE INFO

JEL Codes:

I31
Q50
Z13

Keywords:

Green self-image
Subjective well-being
Life satisfaction
Social norm
Social division

ABSTRACT

Recent literature has found that individuals holding a greener self-image display higher levels of life satisfaction. We extend the single-country setting of that research to a transnational perspective and explore whether a relationship exists between green self-image (GSI) and life satisfaction (LS), both European-wide and at the national level. In order to explain differences in the GSI-LS relationship across nations and time, we study the role of pro-environmental values as a shared social norm. We find a significantly positive GSI-LS relationship in a pool of 35 European countries and in the majority of individual countries. In addition, we show that the well-being benefit of holding a green self-image is greater in societies that display more unanimity with respect to pro-environmental attitudes. Invoking the notion of social norms as *shared* agreements about what is appropriate and inappropriate, we take the latter finding to indicate that part of the well-being benefit from holding pro-environmental values derives from conformity to a social norm.

1. Introduction

Pro-environmental behaviors and attitudes have been a topic of inquiry for decades. Among the issues studied in this literature are the determinants of pro-environmental behaviors (Welsch and Kühling, 2009; Tripathi and Singh, 2016), the determinants of pro-environmental attitudes and concerns (Gelissen, 2007; Welsch and Kühling, 2017a), and the relationship between “green” attitudes, concerns and values on the one hand and “green” behaviors on the other (Tripathi and Singh, 2016; Binder and Blankenberg, 2017).¹

A further strand of the literature on pro-environmental behaviors and attitudes studied the utility consequences of being “green”. In these works, the hypothesis was explored that green lifestyles might be beneficial for individuals' subjective well-being (SWB) because they allow individuals to achieve meaning in their lives and behave in altruistic ways. Consistent with the “warm glow” theory of public good provision (Andreoni, 1990), Videras and Owen (2006) and Welsch and Kühling (2010, 2011) found several types of pro-environmental behaviors to be correlated with greater SWB in both national and international data sets. More recently, Binder and Blankenberg (2017) found that, even controlling for green behavior, green self-image *per se* is associated with greater SWB in data for Great Britain.

The current paper ties in with this latter research and extends it in several ways. First, we extend the purely national setting to a transnational perspective. We explore whether a relationship exists between green self-image and SWB both European-wide and at the national level. Second, we investigate what explains differences in this relationship across countries and time. Specifically, invoking the notion of social norms as *shared* agreements about what is appropriate and inappropriate, we study the role of “greenness as a shared social norm” for the relationship between individuals' green attitude and their SWB.

Social norms, relationships, and comparisons have previously been studied as factors explaining pro-social and pro-environmental behaviors (Lindbeck, 1997; Videras et al., 2012; Welsch and Kühling, 2016), but not as factors influencing the well-being benefits of holding a green self-image. Well-being effects of congruence with social norms were, however, studied with respect to the “work norm”: Building on the economic analysis of “social customs” (Akerlof, 1980), Clark (2003) found that the negative effect on SWB of being unemployed is reduced by the prevalence of unemployment in the unemployed individuals' social environment.

We investigate a similar issue – the influence of a shared social norm – with respect to the relationship between green self-image and SWB. Specifically, building on the social customs (social norm) framework of

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¹ There is an abundant social-psychology literature studying how attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavior control interact in the decision making process that determines the formation of intentions and their behavioral enactment. For a recent contribution that accounts, in addition, for self-image, see Carfora et al. (2017). For a survey, see Tripathi and Singh (2016).

Akerlof (1980), we test the hypothesis that the societal endorsement of a green self-image enhances individuals' well-being benefit from holding such a self-image. Moreover, while that framework suggests focusing on the level of societal greenness, we extend the analysis by focusing on the degree to which the green norm is shared (common) within society rather than being contested. Specifically, we argue that if a positive relationship between green attitudes and SWB is driven by congruence with a green social norm, the attitude-SWB relationship should be weaker in societies that are more divided on these issues. Hence, we formulate and test the hypothesis that greater societal disparity in the degree of being green reduces individuals' utility of being green.

We differentiate the hypothesis of green self-image as a social norm from the hypothesis of green self-image as a manifestation of social identity. The notion of self-image as social identity entails that a certain self-image is beneficial for SWB because it allows individuals to differentiate themselves from others (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000, 2010). The hypothesis of self-image as social identity would imply that the SWB benefit from holding a given self-image is greater when societies are more divided on the relevant issue rather than less divided.² Invoking a social-identity framework, Welsch and Kühling (2017b) found social division with respect to immigration friendliness to enhance the well-being benefit from holding an immigration-friendly self-image (see Section 2).

In our empirical analysis, we use about 228,000 observations on life satisfaction (LS) and green self-image (GSI) from 35 European countries, 2002–2015, and several measures of societal disparity in the degree of being green. Controlling for the usual individual-level and macro-level correlates of LS as well as country and year fixed effects, we find that LS is significantly positively correlated with GSI in the overall sample as well as in 23 individual countries and non-significantly correlated with GSI in the rest of countries. While the positive association between LS and GSI is unaffected by the mean level of GSI (by country-year), the positive association between LS and GSI is weaker when the degree of disagreement on environmental conservation (by country-year) is greater. Out of several measures of attitude disparity, polarization of attitudes undermines the GSI-LS relationship more strongly than does the mere diversity of attitudes. At the highest level of within-sample polarization, the GSI-LS relationship is close to zero. This may explain the lack of a significant relationship found in some countries.

This paper contributes to the emerging literature on green self-image and subjective well-being by establishing a GSI-LS relationship not just for one country but in a pan-European setting, and by shedding more light on the nature of this relationship, suggesting that the well-being benefit from green self-image derives not just from compliance with an internal (moral) norm (consistent with “warm glow” theory) but also from conformity to a social norm. In addition, our results suggest that the validity of the green social norm is best captured by the absence of polarization of the relevant attitudes, rather than by their average level.

From a policy point of view, the finding that the well-being benefit of holding a green self-image rises with its societal salience suggests that the spread of green attitudes within society may be self-reinforcing. Considering that green self-image is a robust predictor of green behaviors (Tripathi and Singh, 2016; Binder and Blankenberg, 2017) and that environmental policy in democratic societies is bound to respect citizens' preferences, this may be an important contribution to environmental conservation.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses related literature and develops our hypotheses. Section 3 presents the data and methods. Section 4 reports and discusses the empirical results. Section 5 concludes.

² We emphasize that a social norm is shared within the whole society. By contrast, social identity involves belonging to a subgroup, whose norms are specific to that group and hence do not constitute a social norm.

2. Related Literature and our Hypotheses

This paper ties in with two strands of literature, which we discuss in the following subsections: green lifestyle and subjective well-being (2.1), and contextual factors of subjective well-being (2.2). Building on that literature, we formulate the hypotheses of this study (2.3).

2.1. Green Lifestyle and Subjective Well-Being

Several studies found a positive relationship between pro-environmental behaviors and subjective well-being. In single-country studies for the US (Brown and Kasser, 2005) and Germany (Welsch and Kühling, 2011) as well as in multi-country studies (Videras and Owen, 2006; Welsch and Kühling, 2010) life satisfaction was found to be positively related to self-reported recycling, resource conservation, and environmental friendly consumption. Those findings are typically rationalized by reference to the “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1990) arising from altruistic and pro-social behavior.

Using data from Britain, however, Binder and Blankenberg (2017) found in a fixed-effects framework that the behavior-SWB relationship becomes nonsignificant when measures of green self-image are included, whereas green self-image itself attracted a significant positive coefficient.

In seeking psychological explanations of why green lifestyles (i.e. behaviors or self-images) may foster well-being, reference has been made to a differentiation between extrinsic/materialist motivations (striving for acquisition and possession) and intrinsic/moral motivations (altruism and empathy). Invoking such a framework, materialistic value orientations and (extrinsically motivated) consumerism were found to be associated with lower well-being (Kasser et al., 2004, O'Brien, 2008, Delhey, 2010, Dittmar et al., 2014; see Pandelaere, 2016 for an overview). In addition to mere correlations, studies of causality (Richin, 1997; Rucker and Petty, 2004) found evidence that, though happier people consume less, the other causal direction also exists: more sustainable consumption leads to greater happiness.

Assuming a non-materialist value basis and intrinsic motivation underlying green lifestyles, the well-being benefits from being green appear to be a mirror image of the well-being repercussions from materialistic lifestyles. In contrast to the latter, a green lifestyle seems to allow individuals to view themselves as altruistic and socially responsible individuals.³

2.2. Contextual Factors of Subjective Well-Being

Acting out of altruism and social responsibility yields utility through adherence to an internal (moral) norm. Moral norms are to be distinguished from social norms (Brekke et al., 2003). Social norms can be defined as shared agreements about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Schultz et al., 2007). Adherence to shared social norms may be an independent source of utility, in addition to adherence to internal norms, and may explain a variety of “non-standard” types of behavior.

Akerlof (1980) was the first to analyze the significance of social norms (to which he referred as social customs) for understanding behaviors that standard economic models cannot explain. Behaviors that can be rationalized by social norms include, in particular, voluntary contributions to public goods (e.g. Lindbeck, 1997). From a social-norm perspective, private provision of public goods yields utility by acting in accordance with what is socially considered as appropriate.

While those works are of a theoretical nature, focusing on the

³ We focus on altruistic motives as those internal factors of green lifestyles that are potentially most relevant for individuals' self-image. We deem other factors of green lifestyle, such as beliefs, awareness, habits, knowledge or concern, to be less relevant for self-image.

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