



Generalized trust narrows the gap between environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior: Multilevel evidence

Kim-Pong Tam^{*,1}, Hoi-Wing Chan^{*,1}

Division of Social Science, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Environmental concern
Pro-environmental behavior
Trust
Social dilemma
Cross-national variation

ABSTRACT

Research has established that people's environmental concern does not always translate into pro-environmental behavior. On the basis of the social dilemma perspective, the present article examines how this concern-behavior gap can be narrowed. We posit that individuals who are concerned about environmental problems feel reluctant to contribute because they fear being exploited by free riders. We further argue that generalized trust can temper this fear because it allows people to expect others to contribute. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the concern-behavior association is stronger among individuals and societies with higher levels of trust. Findings from multilevel analyses on two international survey datasets (World Values Survey and International Social Survey Programme) support our hypothesis. These findings not only elucidate the concern-behavior gap but also suggest how environmental campaigns can be improved. They also signify the need to explore cross-national variations in phenomena pertaining to environmental concern and behavior.

1. Introduction

Research in the 1990s showed that citizens of both poor and rich societies were highly concerned about environmental problems (Dunlap et al., 1993). This global environmentalism was apparently encouraging. However, the optimism it once generated has encountered two hurdles in recent years. First, studies have revealed that *environmental concern* (EC) has been declining in most societies within the past two decades (e.g., Franzen and Vogl, 2013). The second, perhaps more alarming, hurdle is that EC often does not translate into *pro-environmental behavior* (PEB; e.g., Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Considering that mitigating environmental problems requires behavioral change, endeavors by scientists, governments, and organizations to once again raise EC in the public will be a failure if any increase in concern does not eventually drive behavioral change.

The present research addresses the second hurdle. Conceptualizing environmental problems as social dilemmas (Hardin, 1968; Milinski et al., 2006), we posit that people who are concerned about environmental problems are reluctant to adjust their behavior because they fear being exploited by free riders. We further posit that having trust in generalized others can temper this fear because it leads people to expect that others are willing to contribute. On the basis of these premises, we hypothesize that *generalized trust* facilitates the translation of concern into action; in other words, the concern-behavior association is stronger

when generalized trust is higher. As generalized trust varies across both individuals and societies, we expect to observe this hypothesized *moderating* effect of generalized trust at both the individual level and country level. Through multilevel analyses on two international survey datasets, we found support for this hypothesis. These findings not only elucidate how PEB can be effectively promoted but also highlight the theoretical importance of considering cross-national variations in phenomena regarding EC and PEB. In the following, we first review the disparity between EC and PEB. We then introduce the social dilemma perspective and our hypothesis.

1.1. Concern-behavior gap

EC refers to “the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them” (Dunlap and Jones, 2002, p. 485). This concept is usually operationalized in terms of awareness or perceptions of the severity of specific problems and positive attitudes toward environmental protection (e.g., Marquart-Pyatt, 2012). Many studies have reported that people do not necessarily act out their EC (Gifford, 2011; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Lorenzoni et al., 2007). In the present investigation, we refer to this phenomenon as the *concern-behavior gap*.

The gap has been illustrated in past studies that directly examined the correlations between EC and PEB. For example, Finger (1994) found

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: kevintam@ust.hk (K.-P. Tam), hwchanac@ust.hk (H.-W. Chan).

¹ The two authors contributed to this paper equally.

that although their participants on average expressed strong awareness of environmental problems, such awareness failed to predict behavior. Similarly, Tanner (1999) reported that respondents' awareness of the threat of climate change and other environmental problems to the self and others was not associated with their behavior. The strength of the concern-behavior relationship can be summarized by the findings from two meta-analyses: Bamberg and Möser (2007) reported that the pooled correlation between environmental problem awareness and PEB was 0.19, and Klöckner (2013) reported that the pooled correlation between new environmental paradigm, a widely used measure of EC (Dunlap et al., 2000), and PEB was 0.09.

Despite the many observations of the concern-behavior gap, its understanding is lacking in two inter-related respects. First, the possibility that its magnitude varies across individuals has seldom been considered (for exceptions, see Berger and Corbin, 1992; Corraliza and Berenguer, 2000). After documenting the gap in the form of a weak or non-significant correlation, most past studies have proceeded to identify variables that explain additional variances of PEB. For instance, Finger (1994) reported that environmental experiences (e.g., experiences of environmental catastrophes) were more crucial determinants, and Tanner (1999) considered subjective and objective constraints (e.g., inconvenience, cost) as additional predictors of driving frequency. These studies have enriched our understanding of PEB, but they have not addressed the possibility that the concern-behavior gap can be narrowed. Second, to what extent the behavioral influence of EC varies across societies has rarely been considered. Cross-cultural studies have already revealed that internal factors such as values and attitudes determine behavior to different extents in different cultural contexts (Boer and Fischer, 2013; Markus and Kitayama, 2003). However, to what extent these cultural differences apply to the concern-behavior association is largely unknown, as most studies have used participants from a single, usually Western, society only (Bain et al., 2016; Eom et al., 2016). Both Bamberg and Möser (2007) and Klöckner (2013) speculated the possibility of cross-national differences in their meta-analyses; however, they were unable to test it, given the dominance of Western studies.

In summary, there is a dearth of investigations into the possible variations of the magnitude of the concern-behavior association across individuals and societies. It follows that most past studies have not identified factors that can narrow the concern-behavior gap. Empirically, the field needs investigations that test potential moderators for the concern-behavior association (Berger and Corbin, 1992). Such investigations can elucidate how PEB can be encouraged in the public, particularly individuals worldwide who already possess strong EC. To fill this void, we conducted the present investigation with reference to the social dilemma perspective.

1.2. Social dilemma perspective

Many problems facing the modern world can be characterized as social dilemmas (Hardin, 1968; Kollock, 1998). Social dilemmas refer to situations in which the collective interests of society conflict with the individual interests of its members. For each person, acting in his/her own interests yields more favorable personal outcomes, regardless of what other people do; however, if most or all individuals act in their own interests, the outcomes for all individuals would ultimately be worse than if they choose to cooperate.

Social dilemmas are difficult to resolve if every individual is concerned only with his/her own interests. Nevertheless, this pessimistic view is unwarranted. Experiments utilizing public goods games have shown that most people voluntarily cooperate at least some of the time (e.g., Milinski et al., 2006). The notion of conditional cooperation has often been invoked as an explanation for this observation (Fehr-Duda and Fehr, 2016). It suggests that most people care about collective interests, but they are reluctant to contribute because they fear that other people free ride and their contributions would be exploited and wasted;

when they know that others also contribute, they are willing to contribute. For example, Fischbacher et al. (2001) found that their participants' contribution to a public goods game was a linear function of the contributions by other players (see also Aitken et al., 2011; Frey and Meier, 2004). In all, expectation of others' cooperation facilitates people's own cooperation.

Because social dilemmas often involve an enormous number of actors, information about other actors' behavior is typically inaccessible or unavailable. In this situation, people may base their expectation on generalized trust instead (Sønderskov, 2009). Generalized trust refers to a general positive outlook on human nature or an expectation about other people's benevolence (Nannestad, 2008). As Yamagishi (1986) noted in his structural goal/expectation theory, people who trust others expect that others will cooperate in a social dilemma and thereby exhibit more cooperative behavior themselves. Balliet and Van Lange (2013) further explained that because a social dilemma is essentially a conflict between being self-interested and being benevolent, expectation of other people's benevolence (i.e., generalized trust) should facilitate expectation about others' cooperation and thereby promote one's own cooperation. This notion has received support from two lines of evidence. First, studies have shown that generalized trust promotes cooperation *only* when information about other people's behavior is not available; when information about other people's behavior becomes available, people no longer condition their own behavior based on generalized trust (Sønderskov, 2009; Yamagishi et al., 1999). This finding suggests that generalized trust serves as a surrogate source of expectation about others' cooperation. Second, in a meta-analysis, Balliet and Van Lange (2013) observed that the positive association between trust and cooperative behavior is particularly pronounced when the social dilemma involves larger amounts of conflicts between self-interests and collective interests. This observation implies that generalized trust exerts its influence on cooperation through promoting expectation of benevolent actions by others.

1.3. Hypothesis

Environmental issues present social dilemmas (e.g., Irwin and Berigan, 2013; Milinski et al., 2006). It is tempting for individuals to consume natural resources or dispose waste to the environment without restraints, but when such behavior is widespread, ultimately all of humanity suffers. For example, although the risk of climate change can be reduced if every individual and every society contribute by reducing energy use and carbon emissions, such a reduction is difficult to realize because it would likely have a negative effect on individuals' consumption-heavy lifestyle and societies' economic progress (Milinski et al., 2006).

Given that environmental issues present social dilemmas, the notion of conditional cooperation should apply (Irwin and Berigan, 2013; Sønderskov, 2009). We believe that this notion can illuminate our understanding of the concern-behavior gap. When people care about environmental problems, they must choose between acting in their own interests or the collective interests. If they are conditional cooperators, their decision should depend on their expectation of other people's contribution (Aitken et al., 2011). If they possess a high level of generalized trust, they would expect that other people also contribute benevolently; without the fear of free riders, they are willing to contribute and act in a pro-environmental manner (in effect, shrinking the concern-behavior gap). By contrast, if they do not trust others, they would expect that other people do not contribute; with the fear of free riders, they become reluctant to contribute (in effect, enlarging the concern-behavior gap). In sum, we expect an EC \times generalized trust interaction effect.

Considering that past studies on generalized trust and cooperation have focused on the individual level primarily, and generalized trust is typically considered as a dispositional tendency (Balliet and Van Lange, 2013), we hypothesize an *individual-level interaction*:

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7469115>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7469115>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)