



Interdependent orientations increase pro-environmental preferences when facing self-interest conflicts: The mediating role of self-control



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ABSTRACT

The conflict between self-interested and pro-environmental choices induces psychological barriers to environmental protection. We propose that self-construals can influence the preference in such conflicting choices and that self-control plays a mediating role. The current research offered conflicting choices related to green consumption. Participants were asked to choose between buying eco-friendly (pro-environment) and cheaper (self-interest) products. Individuals with both chronic and primed interdependence but not independence had an increased likelihood of selecting the pro-environmental option (Studies 1a and 1b). In Study 2, interdependent individuals exhibited better self-control in a Stroop task and were willing to pay more for a pro-environmental choice than independent individuals. In Study 3, we found that the effect was diminished in an ego-depletion condition. Our findings indicate that individuals with interdependence favor pro-environmental choices compared with those with independence because interdependent individuals are better at exerting self-control to restrain their self-interested desires.

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1. Introduction

China's rapid growth is causing environmental deterioration and arousing great apprehension among the general public. An environmental awareness survey of the Chinese public (CEAP, 2007) showed that Chinese citizens' knowledge and awareness of environmental protection have improved significantly over the last decade; however, the results related to environmental behaviors such as classifying waste and recycling that require people to actively engage revealed a decreasing trend.

Identifying the factors that shape pro-environmental behavior is a complex process. Individuals' pro-environmental tendencies are influenced by numerous factors that include childhood experience, education, personality, social norms and other personal and social elements (e.g., Gifford & Nilsson, 2014; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Prior research suggests that people are more likely to act pro-environmentally if they also think that such actions will have positive consequences for themselves (Evans et al., 2013). However, not all pro-environmental actions align with self-interest (e.g., De Young, 1996; Lindenberg & Steg, 2007). For example, eco-friendly

sprays can be more expensive than conventional sprays, and nonorganic food is cheaper than organic food; the less-expensive options in these examples provide individuals with short-term financial advantages. China is the fastest growing developing country in the world. The Chinese government solved the starvation problem only approximately 20–30 years ago. However, the economic conditions of the majority of people in China have only slightly improved; therefore, they spend their money frugally. Although people realize that environmental protection is important, given the economic conditions, they likely feel internal conflict between pro-environmental and self-interested (e.g., saving money) sentiments when faced with potentially pro-environmental decisions.

The current research sought to elucidate China's environmental dilemma between self-interest (particularly economic benefits) and environmental protection. We are interested in the actions of individuals facing such conflicts. Consistent with the concept that self-construal can have an important effect on environmental concerns (Arnocky, Stroink, & DeCicco, 2007), the present research was designed to explore how self-construal affects preference during choices in which conflicts between pro-environmental and self-interested sentiments are present. To extend previous research, we propose that self-control is a mediator. Specifically, individuals with interdependent orientations value harmonious

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relations with others and social norms and usually suppress selfish desires relative to those with independent orientations (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). Thus, self-control might be a mediating mechanism that helps interdependent individuals restrict self-interested impulses and favor more pro-environmental choices compared with independent individuals.

1.1. Conflict between self-interested and pro-environmental choices

Pro-environmental behaviors occur when one's actions are consciously designed to minimize negative influences on the natural world (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002) such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and waste production. Pro-environmental behaviors are also considered prosocial, altruistic, and moral behaviors (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010; Thøgersen, 1996) that can provide long-term sustainable benefits for the environment and society. Anti-environmental behaviors often imply acting according to personal interests, while many pro-environmental behaviors require people to inhibit egoistic desires to benefit the natural world (e.g., Dawes, 1980; Samuelson, 1990).

From a consumer behavior perspective, green consumption contributes positively to environment protection but usually requires customers to spend more than conventional consumption patterns. For example, a gas-electric vehicle costs more than a conventional car, and eco-friendly batteries cost more than common batteries. Most people might want to save money in the short-term and thus choose non-eco-friendly products. In addition to the monetary costs, when pro-environmental choices require personal time and effort, the barriers to pro-environmental behavior increase. For example, recycling and rubbish collection are both important processes for protecting the natural environment, but not all people take such actions. Some might consider such actions to be time- and effort-wasting behaviors.

When individuals encounter conflicting pro-environmental and self-interested goals, they must intentionally favor the pro-environmental goals to achieve pro-environmental behavior. For example, when the weather is very hot in the summer, people's self-interest might urge them to set the thermostat to 16 °C for comfort, whereas their pro-environmental sentiments might insist that 28 °C would be more appropriate because that setting reduces carbon emissions. When these two goals are in conflict, the goal is to persuade people to imbue the pro-environmental action with more weight and adopt the pro-environmental choice.

Two approaches to solving such a conflict can be considered: to increase individuals' environmental concerns or decrease their self-interested desires. However, based on a CEAP report (2007), increasing positive environmental awareness seems to be insufficient to cause people to act pro-environmentally in China. Similarly, many studies have observed weak correlations between environmental attitudes and conservation behaviors (Gagnon Thompson & Barton, 1994). These findings indicate that emphasizing positive environmental awareness seems to be insufficient to cause people to act pro-environmentally. Thus, we suggest that inhibiting egoistic desire is an alternative method to induce pro-environmental behaviors. We propose that individuals' self-construals in terms of independence and interdependence affect their preferences in such choices.

1.2. Self-construal affects pro-environmental tendencies

The concept of self-construal was introduced by Markus and Kitayama (1991), who distinguished two typical types of self-cognition in terms of the relationships between individuals and others. Individuals with independent orientations consider

themselves to be separate and unique from others; their behaviors arise from internal attributes (e.g., traits, abilities, and values). In contrast, individuals with interdependent orientations consider themselves to be connected with others; their actions are regulated by contextual factors and intended to maintain harmony with others (Cross et al., 2011). In addition to the cultural aspects, Singelis (1994) noted that these two self-construals are both basic human needs that coexist in individuals and can be measured. Similarly, Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) illustrated that private (independent) and collective (interdependent) self-cognitions are stored separately—in different memory spaces—within a single person and that these cognitions are retrieved in a manner that depends on one's cultural background, priming procedures, and situational cues (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lindenberg & Steg, 2007; Trafimow et al., 1991).

Research in cultural domains has shown that people with interdependent orientations place greater emphasis on social happiness than on personal delight (Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009) and exhibit less self-interest (Kitayama & Park, 2013) compared with those who have independent orientations. Additionally, studies that have employed experimental manipulations of participants' self-construals have obtained similar results. Howard, Gardner, and Thompson (2007) explored how self-construal determines the use of power. These authors found that individuals who had been primed to be independent were more likely to favor their own interests during disputes with low-powered opponents than those who had been primed to be interdependent (Howard et al., 2007). Similarly, Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) found that people primed to be independent were likely to be less considerate of others' needs than participants who had been primed to be interdependent, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. These converging lines of evidence indicate that people with independent orientations are more likely to exhibit self-beneficial actions and that those with interdependent orientations are more connected to the social welfare of others.

Interdependent or independent orientations also influence pro-environmental preferences. Past research has shown that individuals with interdependent orientations are inclined to express greater levels of environmental concern than are those with independent orientations (e.g., Arnocky et al., 2007). Arnocky et al. (2007) measured participants' self-construal orientations and utilized an environmental concern scale and a questionnaire involving resource dilemma situations to examine self-construal in association with environmental engagement. These authors found that independent orientations predicted egoistic environmental concerns and resource competition, whereas interdependent orientations were related to cooperation with others in resource sharing. This result may also indicate that self-construal can influence conflicting preferences between pro-environment and self-interest because interdependent individuals may place more emphasis on social norms when conducting their choices than independent individuals.

Hypothesis 1: Self-construals influence individuals' inclinations regarding conflicting pro-environmental and self-interested options. Individuals with interdependent orientations are more inclined toward pro-environmental options than those with independent orientations, and this difference is independent of whether the orientation is chronic (as measured with a scale) or activated by situational cues (i.e., experimental priming).

In addition, we investigate the possible mechanisms that influence such conflicting preferences between interdependent and independent individuals, focusing particularly on the ability for self-control.

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