



Justifying environmentally significant behavior choices: An American-Hungarian cross-cultural comparison

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the function held by justification of environmentally harmful behavior in the relationship between environmental attitudes and environmental behavior. We tested this function in a cross-cultural context hypothesizing culture-dependent relationship between justification and reported behavior. One-hundred American and 100 Hungarian middle class participants responded to the New Environmental Paradigm scale (NEP), the General Ecological Behavior scale (GEB), and self-developed scales for measuring perceived criticality of environmentally significant behaviors and justification for non-behavior. Environmental attitudes and reported pro-environmental behavior were positively correlated irrespective of culture. However, in case of Americans justification appeared to be an organic element of an array beginning with attitudes and ending at behavior, while Hungarians justified non-behavior independently of pro-environmental activities, influenced only by pro-environmental attitudes. Furthermore we observed higher scores on justification, NEP, and GEB scales among Hungarians. Gender differences appeared only among Americans where women showed more environmental concern than men.

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1. Introduction

This study examines the role of justification of non-behavior as an inhibiting factor and that of positive environmental attitudes as an encouraging factor towards pro-environmental behavior for an American and Hungarian sample. Furthermore, the effect of positive attitudes is examined by the increase of the perceived criticality of an individual's deeds in solving environmental problems and, as a consequence, by the decrease of the acceptance of false reasons that justify non-behavior.

The novelty of the examination is the introduction of justification into the framework of understanding the relationship between attitude and behavior (Guagnano, Stern, & Dietz, 1995; Hines, Hungerford, & Tomera, 1987; Kaiser, 2006; Thøgersen, 1999), with special attention paid to the gap between positive environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behavior. Justifying statements are false statements suggesting that improper deeds (from the aspect of environmentalism) actually have positive consequences or proper behaviors have negative ones.

According to our expectations, positive environmental attitudes encourage pro-environmental behavior on the one hand and they

enhance the feeling of perceived criticality in doing something positive for the environment on the other. Furthermore, feeling of perceived criticality makes the agreement with false, behavior-antagonist justification views less probable. We also predict that this model is dependent on national culture. Our doubts were raised regarding the role of justification as cultural differences can be found regarding the intensity of cognitive dissonance reduction mechanisms (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hoshino-Browne, 2012); Hungarians expectedly perform in a less intensive way (Kokkoris & Kühnen, 2013; Van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010).

1.1. The relationship between environmental attitudes and environmental behavior

Positive environmental attitudes and behavior are positively correlated according to many empirical studies (Guagnano et al., 1995; Hines et al., 1987; Kaiser, 2006; Thøgersen, 1999). Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), Norm Activation Model (NAM; Schwartz, 1977) and Value-Belief-Norm Model (VBN; Stern & Dietz, 1994; Stern, Dietz, & Guagnano, 1995) are the most cited models to explain the relationship. All of them state that pro-environmental behavior arises from people's notions that the environment is under a threat and that they are able to make effective actions in order to protect it. Models differ in deriving this

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intention from values (NAM; VBN), attitudes (TPB, VBN) and/or norms (TPB; NAM) and resemble to each other in the concept of control.

These three models conclude the significant influence of attitudes and behavioral control on behavior, and also the influential role of normative aspects of values. In our study we acquired data about environmental attitudes, pro-environmental behavior and behavioral control from the previously mentioned determinants of pro-environmental behavior. Regarding values, we only used implicative explanations from other studies dealing with cultural differences in connection with values. Furthermore, we introduced a new aspect, namely the justification of non-behavior. Although positive attitudes are admittedly shown to be interrelated with behavior, it is true that lack of actions can also be present even if one bears positive attitudes towards the environment (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002). Recently, a growing interest is being devoted to understand the simultaneous presence of pro-environmental attitudes and non-behaving. This line of research focus has the potential to enhance the efficiency of promoting pro-environmental behavior. In our view, justification of non-action can be a good candidate for a factor, explaining the gap between attitudes and behavior.

1.2. Perceived criticality

Control over the success of one's own behavior, in general, is an integral part of all of the models, which is described in the attitude-behavior relationship (Ajzen, 1991; Schwartz, 1977). The attitude-behavior relationship research provides observations suggesting that, in general, it is the concept of self-efficacy which most efficiently captures what we mean by "control" in this context (Ajzen, 2001). While environmentally friendly behavior is a cooperative choice in a vast social dilemma situation (Van Vugt, 2001), and while the concept of perceived criticality was conceived specifically for describing Bandura's self-efficacy (1977) in social dilemma situations (Kerr, 1989), we suggest the concept of perceived criticality instead of the general concept of control in the proposed model.

By definition, perceived criticality refers to "one's perception about one's criticality in the provision of public good" (Chen, Au, & Komorita, 1996, p. 39). Experimental evidence has confirmed that as the level of perceived criticality increases, people are more inclined to contribute to social dilemma situations (Chen et al., 1996; De Cremer & van Dijk, 2002).

De Cremer and van Dijk (2002) generally supported the idea that feelings of social responsibility are the mediating factor between perceived criticality and behavior; however, they proposed that low perceived criticality in a social dilemma may induce justification of non-cooperative behavior thereby preventing the actor from feelings of cognitive dissonance. This process can have an inhibiting effect on cooperative behavior. Embracing this proposal, we have suggested inserting justification of non-behavior between perceived criticality and non-behavior into the proposed model.

1.3. Justification of non-behavior as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance

Justification of non-behavior can prevent an individual from feeling conflicting cognitions when choosing non-behavior. According to the original theory of cognitive dissonance, a state of discomfort arises when two simultaneously relevant but inconsistent elements of knowledge are held by individuals. People are then motivated to reduce the inconsistency of these cognitions which requires specific psychological efforts (Festinger, 1957). Behavioral commitment is an integral part of the theory and cognitive dissonance follows behavior.

Because justification in our proposed model, in line with the suggestion of De Cremer and van Dijk (2002), is seen as a prerequisite

of behavior, we refer to the action-based model of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones, 2009), which integrates previous revisions of Festinger's theory. The model departs from the original theory regarding the role of behavioral commitment in dissonance reduction assuming that not all the perceptions and cognitions are activated consciously and deliberately, including cognitions with action-implications. The discrepancy of cognitions with action implications evokes negative effects, namely dissonance, as these cognitions interfere with effective actions.

Empirical studies of this line of research typically take a causality-oriented perspective (see, e.g., Harmon-Jones et al., 2009; Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Fearn, Sigelman, & Johnson, 2008). Consequently, our questionnaire study, which tests path models, cannot be seen to follow that trend; however, the model proposed in this study was considerably influenced by the action-based model of cognitive dissonance. In the environmental-behavioral context, agreeing with views that justify non-behavior can prevent an individual from feeling conflicting cognitions if he or she tends to choose the environmentally unfriendly alternative. These justifying views can disregard the harmful effects of non-behavior or reframe the advantageous effect of a pro-environmental act as disadvantageous.

Included are examples of various studies that have seen justification playing significant role in explaining environmentally non-friendly behavior. Bratt (1999) provided empirical evidence showing that participants with positive general environmental attitudes refused that intensive recycling behavior justifies car use. He also found accepting this justification to be in negative correlation with environmentally friendly behavior; however, this latter relationship was weaker than the former one suggesting that justification works against pro-environmental behavior mainly among persons with relatively unfavorable attitudes towards the environment. Bratt's study (1999) also underpins the notion that easy-to-make pro-environmental behavioral steps are perceived to justify other more environmentally damaging behaviors which implies that cognitive dissonance felt after a negative deed can also be reduced by performing a simple positive one. Thøgersen and Crompton (2009) have shown the characteristics of simple and painless ways of dissonance reduction that offer specious relieves for individuals. Hansmann, Bernasconi, Smieszek, Loukopoulos, and Scholz (2006) also emphasized self-justification tendencies in the attitude-behavior relationship. By analyzing the data of their Swiss survey sample, they showed that disagreement with justification views (e.g., since batteries are small, the small amount of harmful components can be neglected) has a considerably positive impact on waste disposal behavior (i.e., recycling used batteries). They argue that dissonance reducing justifications emerge mostly as a result of interfering social norms and non-behavior.

1.4. Cultural differences in cognitive dissonance reduction

The main focus of our paper is the role justification plays in determining pro-environmental behavior. Research on cognitive dissonance reduction has revealed the phenomenon to be culture-dependent.

Heine and Lehman (1997) stated that Americans show considerably more cognitive dissonance reduction when they do not behave in line with their attitudes compared to other cultures. Differences of attitudinal responses between North Americans and East Asians were revealed for difficult decisions which contain similar or very close alternatives. In the case of North Americans, typical spreading of alternatives following a difficult decision occurred more often (i.e., overvaluing the chosen and undervaluing the not chosen alternatives). They explain their results basing on the notion of self-concept: Americans are individualistic (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989) and have independent self-concepts (Campbell et al., 1996); consequently, they strongly feel

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