



Public commitment making as a structural solution in social dilemmas[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that public commitment making helps promote pro-environmental behavior. However, not everyone may be willing to make such commitments. Therefore, it is important to investigate the conditions under which commitment making is likely to occur. We expected dispositional trust and situational expectations to determine the willingness to install a system of public commitments. Two studies are presented which show that group members low in dispositional trust (low trusters) are likely to choose for a public commitment system when their situational expectations concerning other group members' contributions are high, while those high in dispositional trust (high trusters) are likely to choose for a public commitment system when their situational expectations concerning other group members' contributions are low. It appears that for both low and high trusters the choice for a system of public commitments is instigated by a motivation to further the collective outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Public commitment making has been used as an intervention strategy to promote environmental friendly behavior in several studies (e.g., DeLeon & Fuqua, 1995; Matthies, Klöckner, & Preissner, 2006) and is seen as quite successful (for overviews see De Young, 1993; Dwyer, Leeming, Cobern, Porter, & Jackson, 1993). In these studies, participants are usually asked to make a formal and public commitment to engage in a particular type of environmental behavior. However, as DeLeon and Fuqua note, "an unknown number of the entire community might refuse to make a commitment." (1995, p. 236). In their own study on the effects of public commitment and group feedback on curbside recycling, an average of 36% of the participants in the commitment conditions did not make a commitment. Other studies on recycling behavior (Wang & Katzev, 1990) and the use of public transport (Matthies et al., 2006) have reported similar reluctance to make commitments.

Although studies on the effects of public commitments do acknowledge that some people may be unwilling to make public commitments, the willingness to make public commitments has not been addressed as a focal issue. Thus, to our knowledge, no research has yet been done that identifies the conditions under

which people will be willing to make public commitments to change their environmental behavior. This paper aims to answer that question by identifying public commitment making as a structural solution to social dilemmas.

A social dilemma situation occurs when the individual and the collective welfare are at odds with each other. The course of action that is attractive for the individual leads to an undesirable outcome for the group. This type of situation is very common in everyday life. Think for example of the various kinds of environmentally responsible behaviors, such as recycling. On the individual level, they are often not attractive to perform, because they are costly in terms of resources such as time, attention or money. It is often more attractive for the individual not to recycle. On the collective level, however, not recycling leads to an undesirable outcome: the rapid decline of our environment. In social dilemmas, behavior for the sake of the collective is called *cooperation*, while behavior for the sake of the individual is called *defection* (for overviews, see Komorita & Parks, 1995; Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004).

One specific type of dilemma is the public good dilemma, in which individual group members have to decide on whether or not to contribute to a certain public good. Not contributing may lead to the public good not being realized, whereas contributing may lead to exploitation when the rest of the group defects (see e.g., Dawes, Van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1990; Van Dijk & Wilke, 1999). Public goods typically are characterized by the property of non-exclusion: People cannot be excluded from consuming the public good. The benefits of a public good can therefore also be enjoyed by the group members who did not contribute. This causes the problem of free-riding: self-interest may lead group members to rely on the

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contributions of others while not contributing themselves. Eventually this may lead to underprovision of the public good. Therefore, it is important to investigate how group members can be induced to contribute to the public good.

There are several environmental issues that closely resemble a public good dilemma (Joireman et al., 2001; Van Lange, Van Vugt, Meertens, & Ruiter, 1998; Van Vugt & Samuelson, 1999). Think for instance of a community that decides to adopt an energy saving system such as solar panels, but relies on its members to contribute to such a system. If no one contributes, the system will not be realized. However, once the system is realized, all members will enjoy its benefits, even the ones not contributing. How can people be induced to cooperate under such conditions? A key aspect of decision making in environmental issues is the balance between self and collective interest. In order to understand such environmental issues, and to intervene in them, it is essential to understand the nature of social dilemmas (Gifford & Hine, 1997; Vlek, 2000).

Past research has shown that a period of communication between group members significantly increases cooperation (Dawes, 1980; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994; Kollock, 1998; Komorita & Parks, 1995). This is explained by the finding that a period of communication gives group members the opportunity to make commitments to each other to cooperate (Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994). Group members then experience a strong norm to keep their commitments (Kerr, Garst, Lewandowski, & Harris, 1997). This research strongly suggests that the making of commitments in the group has a positive influence on cooperation. The question that remains unanswered, however, is under which conditions people are willing to make such public commitments.

1.1. Commitment making as a structural solution

In his structural goal/expectation theory, Yamagishi (1986b) makes the distinction between the “first-order” and the “second-order” public good. The first-order public good is the good the group members want to realize or maintain. People who are convinced of the importance of the original, first-order public good, want to invest in the realization or maintenance of the good. However, the other group members will have to invest as well, or the public good will not be realized. People who have a low level of general trust in others are not expected to rely on spontaneous cooperation: they do not trust their fellow group members to cooperate. Therefore, they are more interested in contributing to a second-order public good: a structural change to the dilemma situation which will ensure that the personal benefit of contributing to the original public good will exceed the personal cost of doing so. Such a second-order public good can for instance be a sanctioning system whereby defection is punished and thus made less attractive. Yamagishi (1986b) labels contributing to the second-order public good *instrumental cooperation*, as opposed to *elementary cooperation*, which is cooperation in the original, first-order public good.

In the Yamagishi studies, the structural change is a sanctioning system whereby the group member that contributes the least, gets sanctioned. Other possible structural changes are for instance a reward system or appointing a leader who decides how much every group member has to contribute (Messick et al., 1983). For the current purposes, it is important to acknowledge that for the individual, these structural changes come with a cost. Most notably, these structural solutions all lead to a loss of personal freedom for the members of the group: they are no longer fully in control over how much they will contribute to the public good. Although a structural change might be beneficial for the provision of the public good, the experienced loss of freedom that accompanies

structural change may produce reactance and induce group members to oppose such structural change (Brehm, 1966, 1972; see also Van Dijk, Wilke, & Wit, 2003 for an application of this idea to the installment of leadership in social dilemmas).

In the current article we suggest that a system of making public commitments possesses characteristics that resemble those of structural solutions described above. As Van Dijk and Wilke (1994, 1999) argued, the interdependence structure of public good settings fundamentally changes when people are offered the opportunity to make mutual commitments to contribute. In a context of public commitment making it may in fact become more attractive for individual group members to publicly commit themselves to contribute than to refrain from mutual commitments. This, of course, is one of the main reasons why mutual commitment making is so effective (see also Chen, 1996; Chen & Komorita, 1994; Van de Kragt, Orbell, & Dawes, 1983), because if one does not make such a commitment others may not be expected to commit. Given that people generally keep their promises and stick to their commitments (Chen, 1996; Chen & Komorita, 1994; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994), situations offering a possibility to make public and mutual commitments can offer a structural solution to the public good dilemma. This brief description also highlights another aspect in which public commitments may mimic other types of structural changes. Similar to structural changes such as the installment of sanctioning systems and leadership, public commitment making may also lead to a loss of decisional freedom. In particular, people may be reluctant to commit themselves to contribute because it reduces their behavioral options. In this way public commitment making is similar to other structural solutions to social dilemmas, and contributing to it can thus be seen as a type of instrumental cooperation.

1.2. The current study

In this paper, we argue that the making of public commitments can be seen as a structural change in dilemma situations. Previous research (Van Dijk & Wilke, 1994, 1999) did suggest that this could be the case but has focused on the implications for contributions. In this paper, we approach this idea from a different angle: If commitment making is in fact a structural solution, then the same processes that determine people's choice for other structural solutions may also determine their willingness to invest in a system of public commitments. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research looked at commitment making this way. In the context of environmental issues, we view environmental behaviors as elementary cooperation. Investing in public commitment making may function as a way to ensure elementary cooperation, and thus take the form of instrumental cooperation. Interpreting and characterizing public commitment making as a possible structural solution to a social dilemma offers a new perspective: It enables us to make use of the theories of structural solutions to predict when people will be interested in public commitment making.

As noted above, in its prediction of the willingness to support structural change, structural goal/expectation theory (Yamagishi, 1986b) assigns a crucial role to interpersonal trust. According to structural goal/expectation theory, people who have a high level of general trust in others (high trusters) will generally have a lower preference for structural change than people who have a low level of general trust in others (low trusters). Due to their lack of general trust, low trusters will be hesitant to cooperate in the first-order dilemma, but more willing to do so to provide the structural solution. Low and high trusters are usually distinguished from each other using a median split on a general trust scale (Yamagishi, 1986a, Yamagishi, Cook, & Watabe, 1998). Based on these findings, one might expect that low trusters are generally more willing to

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