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Original article

Appreciation of nature and appreciation of environmental protection: How stable are these attitudes and which comes first?



Appréciations de la nature et de la protection de l'environnement : quelle stabilité de ces attitudes, et dans quel ordre ?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Attitude toward nature and attitude toward environmental protection are two separate but correlated attitudes. Little is known about the two attitudes' stability/volatility over time, despite the practical value of such knowledge.

Objectives & method. – Using longitudinal survey data from 251 adults in a cross-lagged structural equation model, we assessed the degree of spontaneous (i.e., unprompted) change in the two attitudes. We also considered whether such change could provide evidence regarding causal direction; causation could go in either of two directions between the two attitudes, or it could even be bi-directional.

Results. – We corroborated the substantive connection between attitude toward nature and attitude toward environmental protection; however, the absence of change in the attitudes despite the passage of two years disallows reliable statements about causal direction.

Conclusion. – It is possible to protect the environment by encouraging appreciation of nature, but change in attitude toward nature and attitude toward environmental protection may be difficult to achieve with mature individuals.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – L'attitude envers la nature et l'attitude envers la protection de l'environnement constituent deux notions distinctes mais corrélées. Cependant, la stabilité/instabilité dans le temps de ces deux attitudes reste mal connue.

Objectifs et méthodes. – À partir de données issues d'une enquête longitudinale menée auprès de 251 adultes, et intégrées dans un modèle d'équations structurelles, nous avons examiné les changements spontanés dans les deux attitudes, ainsi que des preuves circonstanciées de la direction de leur relation de causalité. En effet, cette relation peut aller dans l'une des deux directions ou même être bi-directionnelle.

Résultats. – Nous avons confirmé le rapport substantiel entre l'attitude envers la nature et l'attitude envers la protection de l'environnement ; cependant, l'absence de changement dans les attitudes malgré l'avancée dans l'âge des sujets ne permet pas d'affirmer clairement un lien de causalité.

Conclusion. – Protéger l'environnement en passant par des appréciations encourageantes de la nature est possible, mais les changements d'attitudes envers la nature et envers la protection de l'environnement semblent difficiles à obtenir chez les adultes.

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Some of the environmental problems now confronting many societies appear to stem from a lack of individual engagement in ecological or pro-environmental behavior. Accordingly, psychological research has considered a variety of approaches to promoting ecological behavior (e.g., Dietz & Stern, 2002; Steg, van den Berg, & de Groot, 2013). Among these approaches, however, relatively little attention has been given to encouraging the appreciation of nature as a positive motivational basis for action. This seems surprising, as environmental organizations have long sought to build public support for environmental protection efforts by facilitating visits to natural areas. In the early 1900s, for example, leaders of the nascent American environmental movement organized trips into the Sierra Nevada of California for “. . . a political purpose: to introduce large numbers of people to big wilderness and let them fall in love with it, whereupon they would join forces to see that the experience and the wilderness would be passed down the generations intact” (Brower, 1990, p. 303).

The neglect of nature appreciation as a motivating force behind environmental protection also contrasts with findings from environmental psychology in which appreciation of nature, measured in various ways, has repeatedly been found to correlate moderately to strongly with ecological behavior (e.g., Clayton, 2003; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Although these correlations are encouraging, most are based on cross-sectional data and so cannot suffice as a basis for claiming that greater appreciation of nature causes more appreciation for or engagement in environmental protection. To appraise the potential of appreciation of nature to change environmental protection, it is important to adopt a longitudinal design, which enables an examination of spontaneous (i.e., unprompted) change in the two constructs in combination with a specification of the temporal order of that change.

Our objective in the present study was to investigate the extent of stability/volatility, and – provided that change occurs – the direction and causal nature of the link between personal appreciation of nature and appreciation of environmental protection. To do so, we examined spontaneous intrapersonal and inter-individual change over an extended period, as well as the reciprocal causal influences between attitude toward nature and attitude toward environmental protection. We accomplished this by implementing a cross-lagged design with longitudinal data. The work was informed by a theoretical model that posits two natural environment-related attitudes, recently introduced by Kaiser, Hartig, Brügger, and Duvier (2013). It speaks of a strong positive correlation ($r \geq .50$) between personal appreciation of nature (i.e., attitude toward nature) and appreciation of environmental protection (i.e., attitude toward environmental protection). Kaiser et al.'s model is grounded in what is called the Campbell paradigm in attitude research (see Kaiser, Byrka, & Hartig, 2010). In the following, we present the theoretical model and the Campbell paradigm in greater detail before elaborating on the specific concerns of the empirical work we subsequently report.

1. Natural environment-related attitudes and ecological engagement

According to Kaiser et al. (2013), what many researchers have considered a unitary construct – environmental attitude¹ – actually combines two distinct though empirically related attitudes. The

¹ “Environmental concern” and “environmental attitude” are often used interchangeably (cf. Dunlap & Jones, 2002). Although “environmental concern” seems to be more widely used, we refer to attitude in this report because it is the more accurate term conceptually and because the measures used in the research to be described refer to a far broader range of behaviors than simple expressions of concern.

first attitude, which we refer to as attitude toward environmental protection, has environmental protection as its prime object. It covers people's appreciation of environmental protection and their propensity for ecological engagement (e.g., Milfont & Duckitt, 2004). The object of the second natural environment-related attitude is nature (e.g., Brügger, Kaiser, & Roczen, 2011). A strong attitude toward nature indicates that a person appreciates the natural environment and values experiences with and in nature, whereas a person with a weak attitude toward nature is largely indifferent to the natural environment.

The empirical corroboration of attitude toward nature and attitude toward environmental protection as two theoretically distinct attitudes was a theoretical advance, as it helped to solve four problems in environmental attitude theory (see Kaiser et al., 2013). First, the two-dimensional attitude space disentangled a problematic merger of behavioral means that aim at distinct attitudinal goals or objects – environmental protection and nature. Second, the two-dimensional attitude space enabled empirical affirmation of a positive – not a negative – relation between self-interested utilization of nature (i.e., attitude toward nature) and an otherwise rather selfless attitude toward environmental protection. Third, a self-interested attitude toward nature also was found to be positively and substantively ($r \geq .50$) related to ecological behavioral engagement – quite the opposite of the typical evidence (e.g., Milfont & Duckitt, 2004). Finally, by shifting emphasis from an exploitative conception of utility and utilization to a more subtle, and perhaps ecologically sensitive use of nature – for personally gratifying experiences – our conceptualization of attitude toward nature provides an alternative to the proliferation of concepts describing various types of “personal connection with nature” (see Brügger et al., 2011).

Before we review the evidence regarding the stability and causality of the two attitudes, we must take a closer look at Kaiser et al.'s (2013) notion of what an attitude represents. Abandoning mainstream definitions of attitudes as dispositions tangible in evaluative responses (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), Kaiser et al. adopt DeFleur and Westie's (1963) definition of attitudes as “an inferred property. . . [that] is equated with the probability of recurrence of behavior forms of a given type or direction” (p. 21; italics in the original). This conceptual shift in the understanding of attitudes follows with the adoption of an alternative paradigm elaborated by Kaiser et al. 2010; (see also Kaiser & Byrka, in press). We turn now to describe this paradigm, named after Donald Campbell.

2. Attitudes within the Campbell paradigm

Rather than evaluative responses, Campbell (1963) proposed using a difficulty-based transitive item structure as the measurement model for individual attitudes. According to his proposal, someone who appreciates nature or wants to protect the environment will engage in certain behaviors to express such valuations. Predictably, the extent to which a person appreciates an attitudinal object (e.g., nature or environmental protection) becomes increasingly apparent as the performance of behaviors related to that object (e.g., spending time in nature or refraining from car use) becomes more difficult or as abstaining from certain activities becomes more cumbersome. Performance of any one behavior of itself may reveal little with regard to the level or extent of a person's attitude toward environmental protection or his or her attitude toward nature; however, if someone systematically overcomes difficulties with a variety of behaviors that reflect appreciation of nature (e.g., getting up early to watch sunrises, going for walks despite ghastly weather) or of behaviors that serve to protect the environment (e.g., commuting by bike, donating money for environmental organizations), then this general performance pattern

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