Analysis

Does Work-life Balance Affect Pro-environmental Behaviour? Evidence for the UK Using Longitudinal Microdata

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

JEL Classifications:
C83
D10
Q50

Keywords:
Pro-environmental behaviour
Work-life balance
Environmental attitudes
Longitudinal microdata

A B S T R A C T

The environmental challenges we face today have made the need to behave pro-environmentally increasingly salient. Many believe that the modern day “busyness” of life and lack of spare time have kept people from acting according to their values and behaving more pro-environmentally. This study uses microdata from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) to investigate the relation between pro-environmental behaviour, environmental self-perception and work-life balance. Pro-environmental behaviour covers 21 behaviours relating to home energy, personal transport, recycling and shopping. Work-life balance is defined with relation to the availability of discretionary time using both objective and subjective measures. The results from the regression models of overall pro-environmental behaviour suggest that work-life imbalance does not appear to affect, neither directly nor indirectly through environmental values and attitudes, pro-environmental behaviour. The main factors determining the extent of pro-environmental behaviour relate to individuals’ attitudes towards the environment, age, educational attainment, household income and the presence of young children. The sensitivity analysis looking at differing time demanding behaviours reveals that actual availability of discretionary time does not seem to affect pro-environmental behaviour, while the subjective experience of work-life imbalance can have a negative direct effect particularly for more time demanding pro-environmental behaviours.

1. Introduction

The tremendous environmental challenges we face today have made the need to behave pro-environmentally increasingly salient for individuals. However, existing evidence suggests that having environmental concerns and a pro-environmental attitude do not necessarily lead to pro-environmental behaviour (Stern, 2000; Whitmarsh, 2009). There seems to exist a gap between people’s pro-environmental values and their behaviour, which is called the attitude-behaviour gap or the value-action gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Kennedy et al., 2009). Many believe that our modern day hectic lifestyle is to blame and argue that the “busyness” of life and the lack of spare time have kept people from acting according to their values and adopting a more pro-environmental lifestyle (e.g. Thogersen, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Chai et al., 2015). Moreover, not only has the time spent on work and leisure become increasingly imbalanced, the subjective perception of time pressure and work-life imbalance has also increased, with growing numbers of people reporting they feel burned out from work (Peeters et al., 2005). Empirical findings are mixed regarding pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour. Using a survey of the UK public, Whitmarsh and O’Neill (2010) show that environmental self-identity is a significant determinant of carbon offsetting behaviour, but not other types of pro-environmental behaviour. Barr (2007) used a self-report questionnaire of UK residents and found that pro-environmental values are a significant predictor of waste reduction and reuse, but not of recycling. Moreover, researchers often find a gap between the pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. In a nationwide survey in Canada, 72% of respondents self-reported a gap between their pro-environmental intentions and actions (Kennedy et al., 2009). Chung and Leung (2007) reported a gap between verbal commitment and corresponding behaviour in waste recycling among undergraduates on university campus in Hong Kong. Newton and Meyer (2013) found in a survey of residents in Melbourne, Australia, that people who hold different environmental attitudes

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.09.006
Received 2 August 2016; Received in revised form 12 July 2017; Accepted 14 September 2017
0921-8009/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier B.V.
display few differences in actual consumption of energy, water, housing space etc. Valkila and Saari (2013) studied home energy and travel behaviours in three Finnish areas, and found that there is a gap between people’s attitude towards the environment and their actual behaviour. Attitude has become greener, but actual behaviour is changing more slowly.

The cause of the value-action gap is still unclear (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) suggests that to some extent (i.e. in the absence of coherently structured attitudes) people come to understand their own attitudes and other internal states like values, by inferring them from their behaviour(s). Through this process, people’s attitudes and behaviours would be expected to become gradually more consistent over time. However, in everyday life, situational factors often make it hard for people to act in a manner consistent with their attitudes. Some suggest that the lack of a better work-life balance is one of the reasons people fail to act according to their values (Thøgersen, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006). Work-life balance may also directly affect environmental behaviour through objective time scarcity – the amount of unallocated time (i.e. not spent on work, commuting and housework) an individual has - if pro-environmental activities require more time to perform than their less pro-environmental alternatives. Becker (1965) first developed a theoretical framework in which he demonstrated how the existence of a time constraint and time component of activities affect behaviour. The framework has since been used in household economics to include the time component in decision making. It predicted that if activities require more time to perform, then the less total unallocated time one has, the less of those activities one is likely to do. In the context of our study, the hypothesis is that choosing to carry out a pro-environmental behaviour, compared to the conventional alternative, may require greater time commitment in terms of the mental time (effort) and/or the objective time (i.e. physical time) it requires. To illustrate this idea, consider how overworking may affect the choice of mode of travel to work for short commuting distances (2–3 miles). The more pro-environmental option would be to walk or cycle to work, however, individuals experiencing work-related time pressure and/or feelings of ‘busyness’ may be more predisposed to drive their car to work in order to gain time. Consequently, work-life imbalance may influence people’s ability to engage in pro-environmental behaviours, even if they share pro-environmental values and concerns. On the other hand, however, individuals with greater discretionary time may decide to spend it on activities with higher carbon footprint (Binswanger, 2006; Brenčič and Young, 2009; Druckman et al., 2012; Knight et al., 2013). As a result, it is difficult to predict in a clear-cut way if, and how, work-life balance will impact pro-environmental behaviour. Moreover, its effect, if any, may play out differently across behaviours depending on how ‘time demanding’ they are perceived to be.

There is very limited evidence on the direct and indirect (i.e. the value-action gap) effects of increased discretionary time and better work-life balance on the uptake of pro-environmental behaviours. A recent study by Chai et al. (2015), who tested this relationship using data for 3096 Australian citizens collected through a web-based survey in 2010, found that increasing discretionary time is associated with a significant reduction in the value-action gap. However, on that study the authors used employment status (e.g. full-time, part-time, unemployed, retired) as a proxy for discretionary time, which is a rather crude measure of time scarcity and work-life balance. The present study investigates the effect of discretionary time, defined both in an objective and subjective way, on pro-environmental behaviours using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) for 2009/2010 and 2012/2013. We use microdata on households and individuals to empirically test and quantify the relationship between work-life balance, environmental self-perception and pro-environmental behaviour. We improve on the work carried out by Chai et al. (2015) by constructing more accurate measures of work-life balance, which capture both the objective amount of leisure (i.e. unallocated) time available and individuals’ subjective satisfaction with the amount of available leisure time. We attempt to distinguish between objective and perceived (i.e. subjective) time scarcity, as some may argue that it is not the actual, but the perceived lack of time that affects people’s behaviour and quality of life (Peters and van der Lippe, 2007).

We find a strong relationship between environmental self-perception and pro-environmental behaviour. Differences in individual and household socio-economic and demographic attributes also help explain the variation in pro-environmental behaviour. However, we do not find a statistically significant relationship between work-life imbalance and pro-environmental behaviour: that is, working too many hours and feeling dissatisfied with the amount of discretionary time does not appear to be a significant factor determining individuals’ pro-environmental behaviour. Furthermore, work-life imbalance does not appear to act as a moderator of the relationship between environmental self-perception and pro-environmental behaviour. In other words, the value-action gap, if any, does not appear to be a result of lack of (free) time per se. Neither “being busy” (objective work-life imbalance) nor “feeling busy” (subjective work-life imbalance) is found to be associated with an increase in the gap between the pro-environmental behaviour an individual engages in and his/her environmental self-perception. Nonetheless, the sensitivity analysis revealed that “feeling busy” (i.e. subjective work-life balance) can have impact negatively the uptake of pro-environmental behaviour, particularly so for more time demanding pro-environmental behaviours. In contrast, the actual availability of discretionary time did not seem to influence pro-environmental behaviour.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the theoretical framework that provides a context for our empirical analysis and hypotheses. Section 3 describes the empirical methodology and the two measures of pro-environmental behaviour. Section 4 presents the data and descriptive statistics. Section 5 presents the results and discussion. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, we propose a theoretical framework that links work-life balance, environmental values and pro-environmental behaviour, and environmental self-perception. Fig. 1 illustrates the framework that links these concepts and relationships. In particular, we will study the following three relationships:

2.1. Work-life Balance (Objective and Subjective) and Pro-environmental Behaviour (Relationship 1)

Objective work-life balance is related to the economic concept of time constraint or time scarcity. Since the amount of time available to people is fixed, economic theory predicts that the less discretionary time a person has, the less time she will allocate to carry out pro-environmental activities that take longer than non-pro-environmental activities (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the theoretical framework that provides a context for our empirical analysis and hypotheses. Section 3 describes the empirical methodology and the two measures of pro-environmental behaviour. Section 4 presents the data and descriptive statistics. Section 5 presents the results and discussion. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

Environmental self-perception (values)

Work-life balance

Behaviour (action)

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for pro-environmental behaviour and work-life balance.
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