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Personality and Individual Differences 41 (2006) 71–81

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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A moral extension of the theory of planned behavior: Norms and anticipated feelings of regret in conservationism

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Received 2 August 2004; received in revised form 8 October 2005; accepted 1 November 2005

Available online 13 March 2006

Abstract

A twofold morally-extended general version of the planned behavior theory (TPB) is tested using a classical, trait-like conception of individual attitude, which is based on compound measures. First, moral norms are mediated by people's attitude before they affect intention. Second, anticipated feelings of moral regret are included as an additional predictor of intention. Using two cross-sectional surveys of 1394 German residents, the hypotheses were tested employing structural equation analyses. Including anticipated guilt feelings significantly and uniquely contributed to an overall explanatory power of people's intention to act conservationally of 70% and 92%. Surprisingly, self-interest is less significant for the TPB in the environmental domain, as attitudes largely represent moral norms (i.e., 89% and 100% shared variance).

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Keywords: Planned behavior; Environmental attitudes; Conservation (ecological behavior); Moral norms; Anticipated feelings of moral regret

1. Introduction

Environmental deterioration can only be halted if people stop overconsuming natural resources (e.g., Oskamp, 2000). Such abstinence, however, yields an imbalance between collective benefits and

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individual costs. So, the decision to behave more conservationally often means deciding between one's self-interest and that of others; a conflict that is known either as "the tragedy of the commons" or as "the Shephard dilemma." It relates to many of the currently existing environmental problems (cf. Hardin, 1968). Not surprisingly, many see conservation behavior as a form of moral behavior and, correspondingly, question the sufficiency of rational-choice-based models, such as the theory of planned behavior (TPB: Ajzen, 1991), to adequately depict its origins (e.g., Thøgersen, 1996).

Contrary to expectations (e.g., Harland, Staats, & Wilke, 1999), previous findings raise doubts about the necessity of including moral norms as a separate, proximal determinant of intention in addition to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control in the conservation domain (e.g., Kaiser, Hübner, & Bogner, 2005). By employing a version of the TPB less sensitive to incidental influences, based on compound measures and, thus, representing a trait-like definition of the concepts, Kaiser and Scheuthle (2003) found moral norms to be a supplementary predictor of people's intention to act conservationally (next to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control), but only at the expense of a suppressor effect. In this research, we aim to corroborate these findings and test a modified model, in which moral norms are mediated by people's attitude before they affect intention (see e.g., Raats, Shepherd, & Sparks, 1995). In a further attempt to extend the TPB in the conservation domain through moral considerations, we investigate the explanatory power of anticipated feelings of moral regret, a previously found promising antecedent of people's intention (see e.g., Manstead, 2000). Again, a version of the TPB based on composite measures is employed.

2. The theory of planned behavior

Attitude, in the TPB, includes evaluative beliefs regarding certain behavioral outcomes and an estimation of the likelihood that these outcomes will occur. *Subjective norms* represent normative behavioral beliefs and the motivation to comply with these beliefs. *Perceived behavioral control*, which is people's confidence in their ability to engage in a certain behavior, together with the perception of the expectations of relevant others (i.e., subjective norms) and with the attitude toward performing a particular act determine people's intention to perform that behavior. *Intention*, in turn, is the ultimate predictor of behavior (see Fig. 1). The more a behavior depends on the presence of appropriate circumstances that are external to a person, the less a behavior is intentionally controllable. Thus, in addition to the relationship between perceived control and intention, the TPB also models a direct influence of perceived behavioral control—representing *actual control*—on behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Besides these relationships, the TPB is open to further expansion, in principle, provided a supplementary concept captures a unique and significant portion in the explained variance of intention and/or behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

In their meta-analytic review regarding efficacy of the TPB, Armitage and Conner (2001) found behavioral control and intention jointly explained 27% of variance in behavior. This is consistent with Ajzen's (1991) estimate of 25–30%. Turning the percentages around, approximately 70–75% of the variance in behavior remains unaccounted for by the theory. One source of this large proportion of unexplained variance is suspected to be unreliable concept measurement, as the TPB is normally tested specifically, predicting a single action. Such non-aggregated measures are notorious for being unreliable (e.g., Manstead, 1996).

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