



## The relationship between environmental activism, pro-environmental behaviour and social identity

Joanne Dono, Janine Webb\*, Ben Richardson

Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 18 November 2009

#### Keywords:

Environmental activism  
Social identity  
Pro-environmental behaviour

### ABSTRACT

Research on environmental activism remains poorly integrated and ill-defined and to date, there has been little examination of the relationship of environmental activism, pro-environmental behaviour and social identity. 131 students from an Australian University ( $M = 25.04$  years old,  $SD = 8.17$ ) voluntarily participated by returning an anonymous questionnaire containing an environmental activism scale, a pro-environmental behaviour scale and a social identity scale. The results revealed that while there was a significant relationship between social identity and environmental behaviour, only the citizenship component of environmental behaviour significantly predicted environmental activism. In other words, the relationship between social identity and environmental activism was indirect. This research presents the opportunity for further exploration of these relationships and to further investigate their relationship to inter-group processes.

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### 1. Introduction

Environmental activism has attracted research attention across numerous disciplines, including: psychology, sociology, political science, and education.

In much of this research, environmental activism has been conceptualised as a 'function of specific behaviours' (Seguin, Pelletier, & Hunsley, 1998), and numerous types of behaviours have been used to operationalise the concept. Examples include having environmental group membership (Edwards & Oskamp, 1992; Manzo & Weinstein, 1987); engaging in political action (Stern, Dietz, Kalof, & Guagnano, 1995); being a 'committed environmentalist' (e.g. active involvement in environmental organisations; Stern, 2000); intentionally performing 'difficult' environmental behaviour (Seguin et al., 1998); having the potential to influence policy or management decisions (McFarlane & Hunt, 2006) or to engage in environmental protection behaviours (Axelrod & Newton, 1991; Dresner, 1989; Syme, Bevan, & Sumner, 1993). Other researchers, particularly in sociology and political science, have conceptualised environmental activism as a process of collective action to support the environmental movement (e.g. Blake, Guppy, & Urmetzer, 1997; Brechin & Kempton, 1994; Brulle, 1996; Crook &

Pakulski, 1995; Herrera, 1992; Horton, 2003; Mohai, 1992; Tindall, 2002; Tranter, 1999; Walsh & Warland, 1983) or as a rational cost/benefit analysis based on the value of personally contributing to the public good (e.g. Lubell, 2002; Lubell, Zahran, & Vedlitz, 2007).

Environmental behaviour features prominently in the conceptualisations and measurements of environmental activism, yet the extent of the similarities and differences with another heavily researched environmental behaviour construct, 'pro-environmental behaviour', is not clear-cut. Pro-environmental behaviour is most commonly defined as 'intentionally reducing the negative impact that an action can have on the environment' (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), and has been operationalised as 'everyday environmental behaviour' (Tindall, Davies, & Mauboules, 2003), 'conservation behaviour' (Monroe, 2003), 'recycling' (Schultz, Oskamp, & Mainieri, 1995; Vining & Ebreo, 1990), 'transport use' (van Lange, van Vugt, Meertens, & Ruiters, 1998), 'household consumption' (Gatersleben, Steg, & Vlek, 2002), and 'household energy use' (Poortinga, Steg, & Vlek, 2004).

Stern (2000) argued that environmental activism differs from various types of pro-environmental behaviour in terms of impact and intent of environmental protection. Specifically, Stern identified four sub-types of environmentally significant behaviour: environmental activism (i.e. active involvement in organisations and demonstrations), non-activist behaviours in the public sphere (i.e. environmental citizenship, or support for public policies), private sphere environmentalism (i.e. purchase, use and disposal of items that have an environmental impact), and finally, other environmentally significant behaviours (e.g. systemic influences through

\* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 92443753; fax: +61 3 9244 6858.

E-mail address: [jwebb@deakin.edu.au](mailto:jwebb@deakin.edu.au) (J. Webb).

organisations). Stern's work set the scene for further research into sub-types of environmental behaviour (e.g. Homburg & Stolberg, 2006; Wakefield, Elliott, Eyles, & Cole, 2006), and others have demonstrated alternative categorisations (e.g. Karp, 1996). Nonetheless, empirical testing of the relationships between sub-types of environmental behaviour has been uncommon.

### 1.1. The measurement of environmental activism

Gatersleben et al. (2002) and Poortinga et al. (2004) have been critical of the tendency for researchers to develop ad hoc scales of environmental behaviour. Indeed, the proliferation of different types of measurement scales does little to clarify the relationship between environmental activism and pro-environmental behaviour. For instance, environmental activism can be measured as a single construct that is distinct from pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. Blake et al., 1997; Lubell, 2002; Lubell et al., 2007; McFarlane & Boxall, 2003; Seguin et al., 1998; Tindall et al., 2003), as part of a typology of pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1998; Karp, 1996; Monroe, 2003; Olli, Grendstad, & Wollebaek, 2001; Oreg & Katz-Gerro, 2006; Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999; Stern, Dietz, & Kalof, 1993; Stern et al., 1995; Wakefield et al., 2006) or as an undifferentiated class of environmental behaviour that can range from recycling to donating money to environmental organisations (e.g. Axelrod & Lehman, 1993; Clayton, 2003; Kaiser, 1998). Some studies provide information signifying good reliability and factor structure of environmental activism and pro-environmental behaviour scales, but these scales have been rarely used in subsequent studies.

### 1.2. The relationship between environmental behaviour and environmental activism

Generally, the models and variables explaining environmental behaviour have been found to be relatively poor predictors of environmental activism in comparison to other pro-environmental behaviour measures (e.g. consumer behaviour or recycling). One example is Seguin et al.'s (1998) motivational model of environmental behaviour which was based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of motivation (intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and 'amotivation') and used to construct a 'Motivation Towards the Environment Scale' (MTES). Seguin et al.'s model explained only 2% of the variance in environmental activism. Pelletier, Tuson, Green-Demers, Noels, and Beaton (1998) also examined the MTES in another study concerned with environmental behaviour, and found moderate correlations with recycling and reuse behaviours, but only low correlations with environmental activism.

The value-belief-norm model (VBN; Stern et al., 1995) that evolved from Schwartz's (1977) moral norm-activation theory of altruism and Dunlap and Van Liere's (1978) New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) has also been used to predict environmental activism. The VBN model proposes that certain values (i.e. biospherism, altruism, egoism), beliefs (i.e. NEP, adverse consequences, ascription of responsibility) and personal norms (i.e. sense of obligation) influence the types of action taken (Stern, 2000; Stern et al., 1995). Stern et al. (1999) found that VBN predictors could account for between 19% and 35% of the variance in 'consumer behaviour', 'willingness to sacrifice' and 'environmental citizenship', with personal norms the strongest predictor for each behaviour type. However, only 4% of the variance in environmental activism was explained by VBN variables, and personal norms had no direct effect. Extending this VBN model, McFarlane and Boxall (2003) did, however, find that what they classified to be 'context' variables (e.g. environmental group membership) explained the most variance (22%) in environmental activism, compared to only

11% for 'psychological' variables and 2% for 'demographic' variables. McFarlane and Hunt (2006) also examined the relationship to environmental activism of several variables including belonging to an environmental organisation as well as whether people resided in a resource dependent region and found that environmental activism (i.e. a measure of nine self-reported behaviours such as attending a public rally) was affected by such variables. Numerous studies have also demonstrated that environmental behaviour correlates with personal and social norms<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003; Bratt, 1999; Harland, Staats, & Wilke, 1999; Stern et al., 1999; Thøgersen, 1999). However, in a meta-analysis of 57 studies, Bamberg and Moser (2007) found that while variables integral to central theories in this area (i.e. Norm-Activation Theory, Schwartz, 1977, and Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ajzen, 1991) explained 52% of the variance in behavioural intention, they only explained 27% of variance in environmental behaviour per se. Criticism has also been made (e.g. Wakefield et al., 2006) of models of environmental activism that focus exclusively on the characteristics of individuals. For example, Wakefield et al. argued that it could mean the neglect of the potential relevance of 'context' and interpersonal connections. Their results indicated that (so-called) 'context' and social networks were more important than individual characteristics for environmental behaviours, such as attending a public meeting or protest. Collectively, the above-detailed results suggest the potential relevance of taking a broader, group-process orientation when seeking a better understanding of environmental activism. Certainly, Clayton (2003) has argued that an environmental perspective is more compatible with a collectivist orientation given that 'environmentalists' tend to focus on the larger community and ecosystem, emphasise the interdependence of the system and often refer to duties and obligations.

One approach that claims to take a more collective approach is Lubell's (2002) 'rational actor' approach to collective action which draws on the 'collective interest model' (Finkel, Muller, & Opp, 1989) that posits that people will participate in collective action when the expected value of participation is positive. Expected value is calculated by assessing the value of the public good, the probability that their participation will affect collective outcomes, and the selective benefits and costs of participation. This collective interest model was found to explain 30% of variance in environmental activism in Lubell's (2002) study. A further study by Lubell et al. (2007) then revealed that the collective interest model explained 38% of variance in political participation, but only 20% of variance in pro-environmental behaviour.

Yet another approach that conceptualises environmental activism as collective action is Tindall et al.'s (2003) social movement approach which emphasises micro-mobilisation processes (e.g. network ties, frequency of communication, level of movement identification and membership). The underlying assumption of this approach is that the more connected one is to other social movement participants, the more active one becomes. Tindall et al. found that these 'micro-mobilisation' variables dramatically improved the model fit for environmental activism to 46% explained variance, compared to only 15% for demographic variables. They also found that the same variables did not have a good model fit for pro-environmental behaviour (17% explained variance). Similarly, Kempton and Holland (2003) investigated the role of various identities in environmental behaviour by asking active members of US environmental groups open-ended questions regarding 'who

<sup>1</sup> Norms are shared beliefs about how to act that are perceived to be enforceable through reward or punishment (Thøgersen, 2006) and they help to explain why people diverge from acting in their own self-interest in theories such as the Norm-Activation Theory (Schwartz, 1977) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

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