

# Promoting household sustainability: The role of household culture in predicting environmentally sustainable behaviour

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## Introduction

Past research and theory has highlighted the importance of identity as a predictor of behaviour, including pro-environmental actions. Identity theory, for example, posits that people experience cognitive discomfort when engaging in behaviour that is not identity-congruent. Similarly, social identity theory proposes that social identities and the concomitant norms of the group provide clear guidelines for group-relevant attitudes and behaviour.

In the current research we investigate how household culture—the environmental identity and norms of the household—influences householders' environmental behaviour. We argue that past research investigating household resource use has tended to rely on individual-level variables to predict what is usually a collective outcome. We reason that over and above demographics, household infrastructure, and individual level variables, collective household culture will significantly predict behaviour.

## Method & Results

Two studies were conducted to test this hypothesis. Residents of Brisbane and Melbourne (N = 1200), and residents of South East Queensland (N = 1008), responded to an online or postal survey about household waste, water, and energy practices and water conservation respectively. In both studies demographic variables, theory of planned behaviour variables (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control), household infrastructure (Study 2), and household culture were measured. Household culture was conceptualized and measured as the extent to which household descriptive and injunctive

norms support sustainability (Study 1) or water conservation (Study 2), and the extent to which the household has a sustainable (Study 1) or water conserving (Study 2) identity. In Study 2 households consented to the researchers accessing their water utility data, thereby providing an objective measure of household water use.

Results from Study 1 show that in addition to demographic and theory of planned behaviour variables, households who had a stronger culture of environmental sustainability reported engaging in more energy and water conservation and waste minimization. In Study 2, over and above the effects of demographics and water efficiency infrastructure, households who had a stronger culture of water conservation used less water according to objective water utility data.

## Conclusions

Governments around the world are rolling out programs that promote the reduction of carbon emissions. As a site for substantial greenhouse gas emissions, households are often a target for these efforts. The current research suggests that programs that aim to promote more environmentally sustainable household practices need to take into account the collective context of the practices. If households can be encouraged to develop identities and norms that embed environmental sustainability as a central part of the household, real resource savings can be achieved.

## Acknowledgements

Study 2 of this research was funded through the Urban Water Security Research Alliance.