

Environmental behavior across contexts: the impact of multiple ingroup norms on individual behavior

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Introduction

Unlike some social behaviors which are clearly tied to a specific ingroup context, we enact pro-environmental behaviors in a range of contexts. Although previous work on normative influence has focused on the impact of the norms of one salient ingroup on behavior (E.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996), we propose that for behaviors that are performed in multiple contexts, the interplay of multiple group norms may influence behavior.

Specifically, we propose the following:

- The degree of conflict between the norms of multiple ingroups will be associated with behavioral decisions over and above the global norm.
- The direction of this influence will depend on people's initial pro-environmental orientation.

Methods

In Study 1 (online international sample), and 2 (Australian university students) we used surveys to examine the association between measured norm conflicts and pro-environmental behavioral intentions. We computed norm conflict by creating a 3-way difference score reflecting the degree of divergence between the descriptive norms of the 3 groups (family, friends and peers/colleagues in Study 1, and family, fellow students and Australians in Study 2).

In Study 3 (student sample) we manipulated norm conflict by asking participants to reflect upon the extent to which various ingroups are similar vs. the extent to which they are different in terms of what they do to minimize their environmental impact.

In all studies we measured participants' behavioral intentions, and perceptions of efficacy, in studies 2 and 3 we also measured pro-environmental attitudes.

Results

Studies 1 and 2 revealed that the degree of conflict between norms did have an impact on behavioral intentions over and above the effect of the global norm. Results of Study 2 also showed that this effect was moderated by attitudes, such that for those who had positive pro-environmental attitudes conflict was motivating, whereas for those with more negative attitudes, increased norm conflict was associated with reduced intentions to engage in pro-environmental behaviors.

Experimental data support the causal nature of the association between norm conflicts and behavioral intentions, with the results of Study 3 replicating the interaction between norm conflict and pro-environmental attitudes shown in Study 2.

Discussion

These studies demonstrate that the norms of multiple ingroups may impact on behavioral decisions in the environmental domain. Specifically, we demonstrate for the first time that the degree of conflict between multiple ingroup norms impacts upon behavior over and above the global norm. The results also highlight the fact that norm conflicts may be experienced as either motivating or demotivating, depending on your initial environmental attitudes/commitment. The results highlight an additional consideration for the design of social norms based behavior change interventions.

References

- Terry, D.J., & Hogg, M.H. (1996). Group norms and the attitude-behavior relationship: A Role for group identification. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 766-793.