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Psychology of Environmental Attitudes

A cross-cultural study of their content and structure

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Abstract

Environmental attitudes (EA) are a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating perceptions of or beliefs regarding the natural environment, including factors affecting its quality, with some degree of favour or disfavour. Research on EA has been critised as being noncumulative and atheoretical. This thesis addresses these critics by taking a systematic approach to the study of the psychology of EA, and had three specific objectives. First, it sets out to investigate the cognitive structure of EA, that is, what kind of perceptions or beliefs regarding the natural environment people have, how these perceptions or beliefs can be operationalized in terms of dimensions, or psychological constructs, and how these dimensions relate to each other. Second, it sets out to investigate the nomological network of EA, that is, to test causal models of antecedents and consequences of EA by investigating their relationships with socio-demographic (e.g., gender, religiosity), psychological (e.g., social desirability, authoritarianism) and environmentally related variables (e.g., ecological behaviour, inclusion with nature). And finally, it sets out to examine the value/threat–attitude–behaviour causal model, in which EA are deemed to fully mediate the influence of values and perceived environmental threat on ecological behaviour.

Three cross-sectional empirical studies were carried out, involving a total of 2,150 student and general population participants. Study 1, conducted in New Zealand, tests the dimensionality and hierarchical structure of EA. Study 2a, also conducted in New Zealand, involves the development of a new culture-general and fully-balanced tool, the Environmental Attitudes Inventory (EAI), for measuring EA. Study 2b, a Web-based survey conducted in Brazil, assesses the validity and reliability of the EAI in this different cultural context. Study 2c, also a Web-based survey conducted with participants from more than fifty countries, describes the development of a short-form of the measure (EAI-S) and assesses its validity and test-retest reliability in this diverse sample. Study 3 tests the validity, reliability and measurement invariance of the EAI-S across samples from Brazil, New Zealand and South Africa. This cross-cultural study also investigates

causal models of antecedents and consequences of EA, and the value/threat–attitude–behaviour causal model across these cultures.

Taken together, these studies demonstrated the following: (1) EA are a multidimensional construct organized in a hierarchical fashion, with first-order factors either loading on a second-order factor (i.e., Generalized Environmental Attitudes) or loading on either one of two correlated second-order factors (i.e., Preservation and Utilization). (2) Individuals with pro-EA are those who are older, female and members of an environmental organization, who attribute greater importance to self-transcendence, biospheric and altruistic values, who conserve the environment by performing ecological behaviours, who feel connected with nature and concerned about threats from environmental problems, and who support sustainability principles. Individuals with anti-EA, in contrast, are those who are Judeo-Christians, who have higher levels of religiosity and beliefs in the Bible, who support economic liberalism and political conservatism, and who attribute greater importance to traditional and self-enhancement values. (3) Altruistic values, perceived environmental threat (both positively), and self-enhancement values (negatively) are strong predictors of EA, and EA fully mediates the influence of values and threat on ecological behaviour.

Overall, this research has a number of implications. These include (1) the development of a research framework for the study of EA that considers their contents in both their horizontal and vertical structures, (2) the development of the EAI for measuring these contents and structures, (3) the indication that pro-EA still tends to be limited to certain groups within society, which would tend to constrain the resolution of environmental problems, (4) the confirmation of the relevance of both human values and perceived environmental threat in the formation and determination of EA, and (5) support for the mediating role of EA on the influence of values and threat on ecological behaviour.

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