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16 Affective and symbolic aspects of environmental behaviour

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16.1 INTRODUCTION

When you ask teenagers why they bought something you may well hear: ‘I dunno . . . I just felt like it’ or ‘my mate has one’. Adults, however, may be more likely to refer to instrumental reasons stressing for instance that ‘it was the best one’ or that ‘it was cheap’. But do we really always base our decisions on such ‘objective’ instrumental aspects or do we often simply act because (we think) it will make us feel good or it will enhance our status?

Environmental behaviour is almost exclusively studied using rational behaviour models which study what instrumental reasons underlie behavioural decisions (see Chapter 18). The study of affective and symbolic aspects is relatively rare in this context. In this chapter, we will show that affective and symbolic factors can play a significant role in environmental behaviour. We will first present a general theoretical framework on the role of affective and symbolic factors, along with definitions of key concepts. After that, we provide a brief overview of empirical research in this area.

16.2 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INSTRUMENTAL, AFFECTIVE AND SYMBOLIC ASPECTS?

The **theory of the meaning of material possessions** (Dittmar, 1992, 2004) suggests that material goods can fulfil a range of instrumental, social symbolic and affective functions. The **instrumental functions** relate to the functional properties of a product. A car, for instance, may get us from A to B quicker than public transport and an iPod allows us to store and transport more music than a portable CD player. But both of these products can also be used to signify personal qualities, social standing, group affiliation and gender role and thus have **symbolic functions**. For instance, some people will love to drive a pink Volkswagen Beetle, others will not and this may have very little to do with the price of the car or whether it can get from A to B within a particular time.

Dittmar (1992) distinguishes self-expressive and categorical symbolic functions. The **categorical function** refers to the extent to which material possessions may be used to communicate group membership and status. For example, the image of a

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pink Volkswagen evokes images of a different social group than the image of a black BMW (see also Dunn & Searle, 2010). Possessions may also be important to people because they reflect a person's unique qualities, values or attitudes and thus have a **self-expressive function**. These are often (but not always) possessions that symbolise close personal relationships and reflect personal history and memories, such as a photo album. Both instrumental and symbolic functions are related to **affective functions**. For instance, the physical properties of a four wheel drive vehicle or a new mobile phone may evoke feelings of excitement or pleasure, and depending on the social context (the presence of a social group and our identification with that group), can also make us feel proud or embarrassed.

The purchase and use of material goods are examples of environmental behaviour (see Chapter 13). We suggest that the three functions of material possessions should be taken into account when studying motivations of environmental behaviours. Environmental behaviours are motivated not only by (anticipated) instrumental outcomes of this behaviour (e.g. if I take the bus to work it will take longer than if I drive), but also by the symbolic outcomes (e.g. if I take the bus to work my colleagues will think I am a weirdo), and the affective outcomes (e.g. if I drive to work my journey will be more fun than if I take the bus). So, three types of motives may underlie environmental actions: instrumental, affective and symbolic (see Figure 16.1). In many cases, the three types of motives are related, as shown in Figure 16.1. For instance, driving a hybrid or electric car is more environmentally friendly (instrumental), it may be more (or less) fun to drive (affect) and it may be status enhancing (symbolic) which in turn may make you feel proud (cf. Griskevicius, Tyber, & Van den Bergh, 2010).

The relevance of the model as shown in Figure 16.1 for understanding environmental behaviour can be usefully demonstrated by studying car ownership and use. The purchase and use of a car are likely to be related to instrumental, symbolic and affective motives. Car advertisement testifies to this. It often does not just stress the instrumental value of cars, but also (and sometimes exclusively) the affective and symbolic values. For example, a car advertisement may stress the fuel economy or

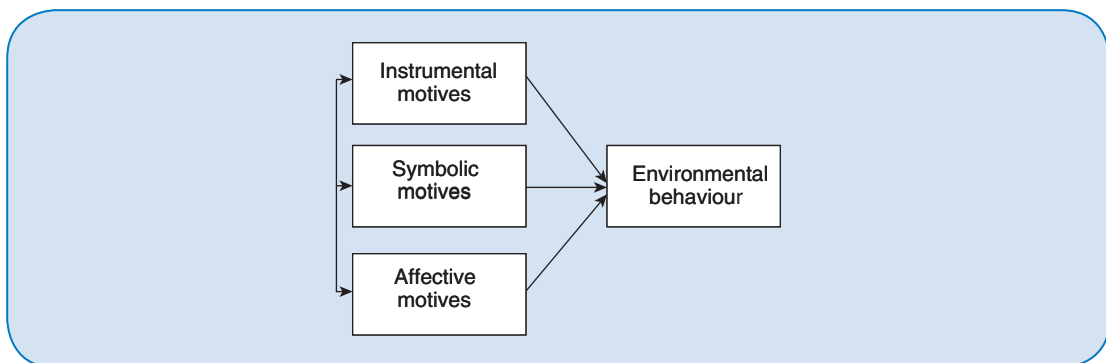


Figure 16.1 Instrumental, symbolic and affective motives of environmental behaviour.

the catalogue price of a car (instrumental) but more often it will stress the fun of driving (affect), or that others will envy you when you drive this particular car (symbolic). Also, if you carefully listen to the way people talk about their cars, you will notice that the car is often much more than just a means of transport. For many people owning the 'right kind' of car is important and, for many, driving itself is fun. Some car journeys (e.g. taking the car out for a spin) are not made to get from A to B but are almost exclusively motivated by anticipated positive affective outcomes (e.g. fun; see Mokhtarian & Salomon, 2001).

Steg (2005) examined whether the three types of motives predict commuter car use. Her research showed that instrumental, symbolic and affective motives can indeed be distinguished empirically, suggesting that commuters recognise each of them. Moreover, commuter car use tends to be more strongly related to symbolic and affective motives than to instrumental motives (such as costs; Steg, 2005). Even for highly functional journeys such as commuting journeys affective and symbolic motives clearly play an important role. This may be even more so for leisure journeys (Anable & Gatersleben, 2005). Steg (2005) also showed that people tended to agree on the relative importance of instrumental motives for car use, but judgements on symbolic and affective motives were more varied. Generally, young people and low-income groups seemed to value affective functions of the car more than older people and higher-income groups, and male drivers valued symbolic (and some affective) outcomes more than did female drivers (Steg, 2005; Steg, Vlek, & Slotegraaf, 2001).

An explorative study among a Danish sample also observed that symbolic and affective aspects play an important role in car use, and that the car is evaluated much more favourably on these aspects than public transport (Jensen, 1999). Regular car drivers in particular tended to evaluate car use very favourably. Similar results were reported by Steg (2003; see Box 16.1 and Figure 16.2).

BOX 16.1 EVALUATIONS OF THE CAR AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In a questionnaire study, 1803 Dutch respondents evaluated the attractiveness of the car and public transport by comparing both modes of transport on 17 aspects (Steg, 2003). Figure 16.2 shows that car use was evaluated very positively by Dutch respondents on many instrumental (e.g. speed), symbolic (e.g. status) and affective (e.g. pleasure) aspects, while judgements of public transport were far less favourable. In fact, the car was evaluated more positively than public transport in nearly every respect, with

one exception: travelling by public transport was believed to be safer. The difference in perceived advantages of car use as compared to public transport use were particularly salient for convenience, independence, flexibility, comfort, speed, reliability and pleasure. Moreover, the car was thought to offer more status than public transport. Strikingly, Figure 16.2 reveals that even infrequent car users (24 per cent of the sample) evaluated cars more favourably than public transport in nearly every respect.

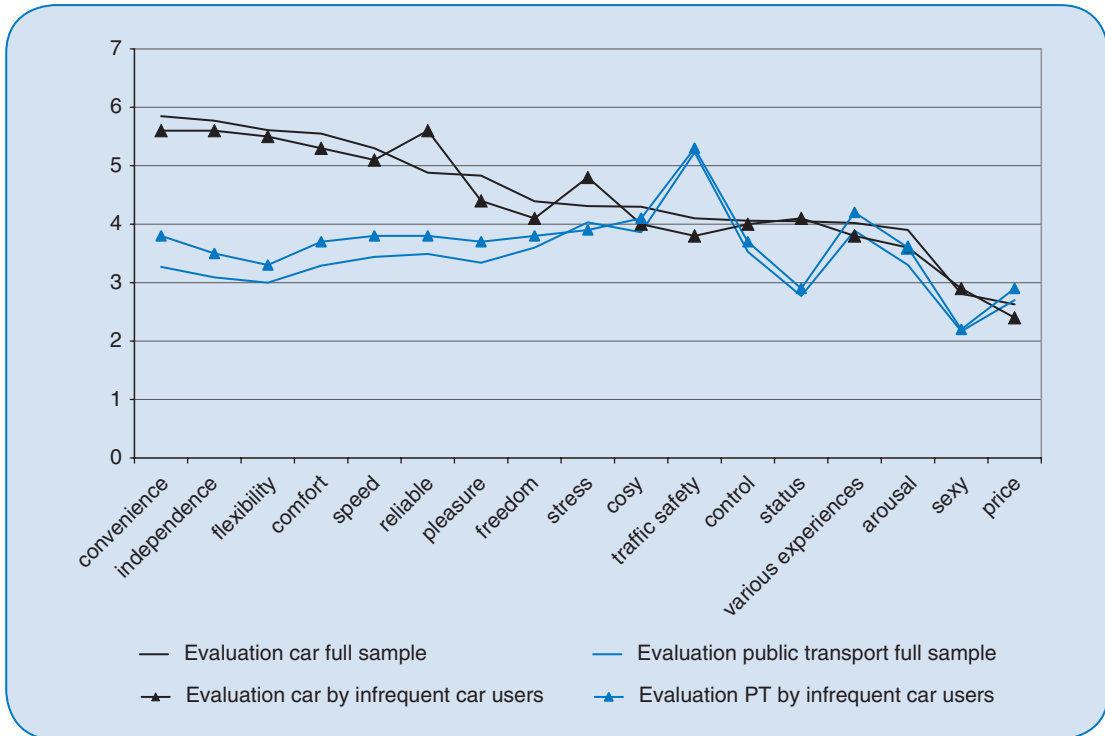


Figure 16.2 Evaluation of the attractiveness of travelling by car and public transport by full sample and by infrequent car users on 17 aspects. See Box 16.1 for an explanation.

Adapted from Steg (2003).

Although affective and symbolic aspects play important roles in people's judgements about the attractiveness of car use aspects, the importance of symbolic and affective aspects relative to instrumental aspects may vary depending on the research methodology used (Steg et al., 2001). Overall, when respondents are asked to evaluate the car on a rating scale, instrumental aspects tend to be judged as more important than symbolic and affective aspects. However, when the research task is more ambiguous (i.e. when respondents evaluate scenarios in which positive and negative instrumental, symbolic and affective aspects of car ownership and use are systematically varied), symbolic and affective aspects influence attractiveness ratings more than instrumental aspects (Steg et al., 2001). People may be reluctant to admit that a car fulfils symbolic and affective functions. Car owners and drivers appear to be inclined to justify and rationalise their behaviour.

It is clear that it is important to consider instrumental as well as symbolic and affective motives for car ownership and use. But what about other environmental behaviours? Below, we discuss the potential significance of symbolic and affective motives in more detail for a wider range of environmental behaviours, drawing from a broader range of research findings and theoretical developments.

16.3 SYMBOLIC MOTIVES

Self-identity

Self-identity refers to the labels people use to describe themselves (e.g. Cook, Kerr, & Moore, 2002). Identities are formed through a process of self-categorisation and identification (Stets & Burke, 2000). A distinction is often made between personal (reflecting unique personal characteristics) and social identity (reflecting group membership; see Dittmar, 1992, 2004). People identify with different roles, e.g. I am a man, I am a student, I am a football player or I am an environmentalist. One person can identify with more than one role at the same time, although different identities become salient at different points in time depending on the social and physical context. For instance, at work I am more likely to describe myself as a lecturer but at my children's school meeting I am more likely to describe myself as a parent. We express our own identity and make inferences about other people's identities based on a lot of information including visible possessions and behaviours (Belk, 1988). For example, we make different inferences about personal characteristics of someone who drives a BMW than about someone who drives a Toyota Prius.

Identities can form barriers to pro-environmental behaviours but they can also motivate such behaviour. For instance, car drivers tend to be less willing to reduce their car use when they derive a sense of personal identity from driving (Stradling, Meadows, & Beatty, 1999). Moreover, the extent to which people are willing to change their car use under certain scenarios is strongly related to the extent to which these scenarios are perceived to threaten their identity (Murtagh, Gatersleben, & Uzzell, 2010). On the other hand environmental behaviour tends to be positively related to **environmental identity** – the extent to which people indicate that environmentalism is a central part of who they are. For example, people with a green identity more often act pro-environmentally (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Manetti, Peirro and Livi (2002) developed the **identity similarity** concept, which measures the correspondence between the characteristics a person attributes to him or herself and to a typical person who adopts certain behaviour (e.g. a typical recycler). They found that identity similarity explained behaviours over and above other variables such as attitudes, perceived behavioural control and subjective norms. This is true both for consumer behaviours (purchasing fashionable watches, trendy backpacks and mobile phones; Manetti et al., 2002) as well as pro-environmental behaviours (Manetti, Peirro, & Livi, 2004).

Status

The extent to which people believe they can derive a sense of status from owning and using the right kind of product can be an important motivator for behaviour. It has been shown, for instance, that people tend to attribute more personal abilities

(e.g. intelligence) and sophisticated qualities (e.g. cultured), but also less pleasant personal characteristic, to a hypothetical affluent person (who owned more consumer products such as cars and appliances) than a less affluent person (who owned fewer of such products) and that they are more likely to desire the lifestyle of the affluent person than that of the less affluent person (Christopher & Schlenker, 2000). The extent to which people believe material objects have status value varies significantly among people and is particularly strongly related to **materialism**, which can be defined as 'the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states' (Richins, 2004, p. 210). More materialistic individuals place more value on becoming wealthy, owning possessions and conveying status with possessions than less materialistic individuals. A series of studies in the UK revealed that individuals who have stronger materialistic value orientations are more likely to express a desire to drive a super car for a day, to believe they can impress others by owning a sports car and mobile phone (but not an eco-house or green roof), and to believe they would feel proud when driving an expensive car, while they are less likely to indicate they would be willing to reduce their car use (Gatersleben, 2010).

Although most research suggests that status motives are particularly relevant for explaining desires to increase consumption, recent experimental studies among US students suggest that status concerns can also motivate pro-environmental behaviours. A study demonstrated that participants were more likely to choose green products rather than non-green products when status motives were made salient (Griskevicius et al., 2010). This was particularly true when choices were made in public rather than anonymously (e.g. in a regular versus a virtual store), and when the green product was more expensive than the non-green product. This work suggests that people may buy green products if they believe that it will enhance their status by showing others that they have sufficient resources to make altruistic sacrifices.

16.4 AFFECTIVE MOTIVES

Affect is often studied in research on environmental risk. For instance, there is a wealth of research examining the link between affect and environmental decision making (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006), risk perception (e.g. Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; see also Chapter 2), and responses to environmental issues (e.g. Fraj & Martinez, 2007; Lee & Holden, 1999). More recently, affect has also been studied as a motivator of pro-environmental behaviour. For instance, some research suggests that people's emotional affinity with nature may be a better predictor of pro-environmental behaviour than cognitive beliefs about environmental issues (Kals, Schumacher, & Montada, 1999; Schultz & Tabanico, 2007). In addition, De Young (2000) suggests that some environmental behaviours 'are worth engaging in

because of the personal, internal contentment that engaging in these behaviours provides' (p. 515). This, as well as the reverse (discontentment), will be the focus of the following paragraphs which aim to show that the extent to which people believe behaving pro-environmentally will elicit positive or negative affective experiences (anticipated affect), and the extent to which participation in such behaviour results into positive or negative affective experiences (experienced affect) can be important predictors of (future) pro-environmental behaviour.

Anticipated affect (e.g. expecting to feel good or guilty when doing something) can be a strong motivator or barrier for behaviour, including pro-environmental behaviour. A survey among Norwegian graduate students revealed that anticipated affective outcomes, in this case the extent to which the students believed recycling is relaxing, pleasant and boring, were a better predictor of intentions to recycle than anticipated instrumental outcomes (the extent to which they believed it was good, wise and beneficial; Kraft, Rise, Sutton, & Røysamb, 2005). In a similar vein, a survey among residents of two Italian cities showed that anticipated positive affect (e.g. the behaviour would make me feel excited, glad, happy) and negative affect (e.g. not doing this would make me feel angry, frustrated, sad) were important predictors of the desire to recycle and use public transport (Carrus, Passafora, & Bonnes, 2008). The extent to which respondents believe that engaging in a behaviour will make them feel good or less bad may even remain a significant predictor of recycling behaviour when attitudes (good, valuable, wise and desirable) are controlled for (Smith, Haugtvedt, & Petty, 1994), especially when respondents have weaker attitudes. The latter suggests that anticipated affective outcomes may be strong predictors of behaviour, particularly when people have no strong opinions about a certain action. Other research suggests that people are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviour when they believe they will derive pleasure and satisfaction from doing so, particularly when behaviour is relatively difficult (Pelletier, Tuson, Green-Demers, & Noels, 1998).

People's expectations about how they may feel if they engage in behaviour are likely to be influenced by their past experiences. If performing a specific behaviour has previously resulted into a pleasant outcome, people are more likely to engage in this behaviour again and less likely to be willing to change this behaviour. Past experiences can therefore be strong motivators or barriers for future behaviour and behaviour change. For instance, car use generally elicits more positive feelings than the use of public transport (e.g. Jensen, 1999; see also Box 16.1) which may form an important barrier for change (i.e. adopting more sustainable forms of transport). It has been shown that people who are emotionally attached to their car tend to drive more frequently and evaluate policy measures aimed at reducing car use as less acceptable than those who are less emotionally attached to their car (Nilsson & Küller, 2000).

Clearly affective outcomes can play an important role in environmental behaviour. An important question then becomes: how can we make pro-environmental actions more pleasant than environmentally harmful options? Little research has been conducted on this topic, but some interesting initiatives have been put forward. For instance, the website thefuntheory.com shows examples of ways to make pro-environmental actions fun. In one initiative, regular stairs were transformed into a

piano: each tread makes a different sound, and by walking the stairs people can compose their own music. This resulted in a significant increase of the use of the stairs, and a substantial decrease in the use of the escalator next to it (see <http://www.thefuntheory.com/piano-staircase>).

16.5 SUMMARY

This chapter aimed to provide an overview of relevant research findings and theory development on the role of symbolic and affective motives in environmental behaviour. We showed that environmental behaviour is not only influenced by instrumental motives (such as costs, time investments), but also (and sometimes more strongly) by symbolic (e.g. a way to express your identity, status or group membership) and affective (e.g. pleasure, thrill, anger) motives. This is in line with Dittmar's (1992) theory of the meaning of material possessions. Positive affect, identity and status concerns may inhibit pro-environmental actions, but can also promote such actions. If people anticipate feeling good when acting pro-environmentally (e.g. cycling or recycling) or if such behaviour has actually resulted in positive feelings, they are significantly more likely to do so (again). For future research it is therefore important to examine the positive affective and symbolic motives for environmental behaviour. If we can enhance the symbolic and affective value of pro-environmental behaviour more people will be likely to adopt this behaviour.

GLOSSARY

- affective function** The extent to which a product is expected to produce affective outcomes such as pleasure.
- anticipated affect** The expectation that engaging in a particular behaviour makes us feel good or bad.
- categorical function** The extent to which a product enables you to communicate your group membership and status.
- environmental identity** The extent to which people indicate that environmentalism is a central part of who they are.
- identity similarity** The extent to which a person sees him or herself similar to a typical person who performs a particular behaviour.
- instrumental function** The perceived functional properties of a product such as costs or size.
- materialism** The importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired end states.
- self-expressive function** The extent to which a product enables you to express your unique qualities, values and attitudes.
- self-identity** A person's sense of who he or she is; their distinctive and unique qualities.

symbolic function The extent to which a product enables you to communicate group membership, status or your identity.

theory of the meaning of material possessions Theory that proposes that the use of material possessions fulfil affective, symbolic and instrumental functions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Dittmar, H. (1992) *The social psychology of material possessions: To have is to be*. Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf; New York: St. Martin's Press.

Gatersleben, B. (2007). Affective and symbolic aspects of car use: a review. In: T. Gärling & L. Steg (Eds.), *Threats to the quality of urban life from car traffic: Problems, causes, and solutions* (pp. 219–234). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Steg, L. (2005). Car use: Lust and must. Instrumental, symbolic and affective motives for car use. *Transportation Research A*, 39, 147–162.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Briefly describe the theory of material possessions.
2. Give an example of a consumer item that is popular because of its affective and symbolic value, and describe why this is the case.
3. Define instrumental, affective and symbolic functions of car use.
4. Describe how anticipated affective experiences may form a motivator or a barrier to adopting pro-environmental behaviour.