

Environmentalism as a virtue

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Pro-environmental actions, climate change and denial: Do self-affirmations make a difference to people's motives and beliefs about making a difference?

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Social concerns with the imperative of environmentally sustainable lifestyles sit rather awkwardly with ideas about the widespread denial of global environmental problems. Given the very obvious threat and denial dimensions to these issues, we conducted two studies assessing the impact of self-affirmation manipulations on people's beliefs and motives regarding pro-environmental actions. In Study 1, participants (N = 125) completed an affirmation task and read information on the threat of climate change. Results showed that the affirmation manipulation resulted in higher personal efficacy regarding climate change-related actions but did not affect beliefs about the reality of climate change and its effects. In Study 2, participants (N = 132) completed an affirmation task and read some information on recycling. Findings showed a beneficial effect of a morality affirmation manipulation on intentions to increase recycling behaviour (among lower recyclers). The results are discussed in relation to the potential benefits of self affirmation manipulations for promoting pro-environmental actions.

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Environmentalism as a Virtue

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Many of the currently existing environmental problems stem from self-interest undermining people's resource conservation in the common interest. Consistent with this view, pro-environmental engagement is often seen as a selfless, prosocial activity. As an extension of previous work, we found a well-established self-report measure of past conservation behavior to predict an individual's active participation in a psychological experiment, as well as their performance in this common dilemma experiment. Based upon their degree of environmental engagement, originally established in 2003, we re-contacted a sample of 502 participants in 2005. Of these re-contacted persons, 131 persons showed up for the announced experiment. Knowing a person's level of environmentalism allowed us to forecast their propensity to act prosocially even outside the environmental domain, and even with specific overt prosocial actions, such as cooperating more in commons dilemma experiments and more likely showing up for a psychological experiment. Thus, our findings lend credit to the notion of environmentalism as a valid measure of differences in people's prosocial propensity. Most remarkably, however, these results also speak of environmentalism as a virtue and of environmentalists to generally be the „better,“ more prosocially acting persons. Our findings also caution against overly high hopes for moral motives (e.g., norms) as viable means for effectively promoting environmental conservation.

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