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The Psychology of Environmentalism

Plenty of people give lip service to solving environmental issues, but what is it that leads them to change the way they relate to their physical world? According to research conducted by psychologists at UC Santa Barbara, it may have a lot to do with culture.

Individual concern, they suggest, is more strongly associated with motivation to act in countries that espouse individualistic values, while social norms may be stronger in collectivistic societies. Their findings are published in the journal Psychological Science.

“It isn’t that people from different cultures have more or less pro-environmental beliefs or engage in more or less pro-environmental actions,” said Kimin Eom, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences and the paper’s lead author. “The triggers for these actions are what vary across cultures.

“Our findings suggest that changing personally held beliefs, attitudes and concerns about social issues, which is one of the most frequent strategies for behavioral change, may not guarantee corresponding change in all cultures,” Eom continued. “It is more likely to be effective in fostering people’s actions to address environmental issues in more individualistic cultural contexts.”

Eom became interested in the links between culture, environmental concern and environmental action when he noticed that both public discussion and academic research on environmental behavior typically focus on people from Western

countries. This is noteworthy, he said, because Western countries tend to have cultural values that prioritize the attitudes and beliefs of individuals and encourage their expression.

“The assumption seemed to be that once individuals are led to believe in the urgency of environmental issues and have stronger concerns about sustainability, they will change and act to address these issues,” explained Eom.

But, the researchers hypothesized, this relationship might not hold for individuals living in more collectivistic societies, which place more emphasis on social harmony and conformity than on self-expressions. In one study, Eom and his co-authors, Heejung S. Kim and David Sherman, both professors of psychological and brain sciences at UCSB, examined data collected from individuals in 48 countries for the World Values Survey. As part of the survey, participants rated how serious they considered various environmental issues, including global warming and pollution. As a measure of environmental action, individuals also rated their support for two strategies aimed at addressing environmental pollution: allocating a portion of their income and paying increased taxes.

The results showed that expressing concern about environmental issues wasn’t necessarily linked to support for environmental action. “We found that nations dramatically differed in how much personal concerns about the environment were associated with intentions to perform environmentally friendly behavior,” Eom said.

According to the researchers, data from respondents in the United States, a country with a high level of individualism, showed the strongest correlation between the two variables. At the same time, data from participants in many countries showed almost no relation between environmental concern and pro-environmental behavioral intentions.

Further analysis, they said, demonstrated that the link between environmental concern and support for environmental action was associated with national-level individualism: The more individualistic the society, the stronger the link. This remained true even after the researchers took various other cultural factors into account.

To examine whether different factors drive environmental action in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the researchers conducted a second study with participants from the U.S. (individualistic) and Japan (collectivistic). In line with their

previous findings, environmental concern was correlated with environmental behavior — in this case, choosing environmentally friendly products — but only among American participants.

Conversely, believing that a large proportion of people engage in environmentally friendly behaviors was associated with making eco-friendly choices among Japanese participants, but not among those from the U.S. Together, the findings suggest that personal concerns are more likely to motivate people to take environmental action if they live in individualistic countries, whereas social norms are more likely to drive people to engage in environmentally conscious behavior if they live in collectivistic countries.

The research has direct implications for galvanizing public support and action in relation to environmental issues, but it also sheds light on promoting public engagement in societal issues more broadly, Eom said. “Getting citizens actively engaged is critical to addressing urgent social challenges, such as climate change,” he noted. “Our research suggests that scientists, policymakers and activists need to understand how culture shapes the psychological antecedents of action to develop policies, campaigns and interventions that address important social issues.”

Keiko Ishii of Kobe University is also a co-author on the research.

About UC Santa Barbara

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