Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about environmental attitudes and actions, and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was conducted by Fiona Barlow, Jayne Farquharson and Angela Nickerson under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS IN RELATION TO COMMUNITY IDENTITY – STUDY 2
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR. This study built on a previous investigation, looking at environmental attitudes and actions and how they relate to different kinds of community identity, norms and efficacy perceptions.

We had two research questions. First, there is a theoretical model called social identity theory that says that when people identify with social groups they often adopt the values and behaviours that are seen as appropriate and that are common for that group. How you think of yourself changes all the time, depending on the context, according to this model – e.g., as a student at uni, an Australian, etc… The idea here is that as these identities change, people’s attitudes and views can change too, because the norms (i.e., views on what’s appropriate) are different for each group.

In a previous study we looked at what level of geographic community people identified with (e.g., from “world” to “Australia”, “Queensland”, “Brisbane” “neighbourhood” etc.) to see if that linked to different attitudes and actions regarding the environment. In that study we found that the community people identified with was related to the kind of community resources they cited as being important to protect. Overall people were positive about protecting the environment, and people who felt more positive were more likely to engage in environmental actions such as recycling. This earlier study found that the more people see others as pro-environment, the more positive attitudes people have to protecting the environment. People who identified with Australia and see Australians as more pro-environment, and/or who identified with a neighbourhood which is more pro-environment, had more positive attitudes to protecting the environment. Both positive attitudes and (independently) identifying with communities that support the environment led to political action, while positive attitudes alone emerged as the driver for personal action.

In the current study we asked different groups of people specifically to focus on one kind of community (e.g., nation vs state vs neighbourhood) with an eye to seeing whether than manipulation changed reported attitudes, efficacy and action about the environment.

A second research question we had concerned how people relate to the authorities for their community. So we asked questions about whether people felt they could influence decision-making by politicians for their community, and tried to relate that to action. Basically we expected that the more “efficacy” people felt (the more they thought they could have an impact) the more likely they would be to take action.
SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

During December 2005-March 2006, 216 people completed the study. Participants were students from UQ, and were first year psychology students participating for course credit, were enrolled in classes at UQ, or were simply asked to participate while at the campus. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 46 (but 75% were 19 or younger), and were predominantly female (71%).

WHAT WE FOUND

1. IDENTIFICATION WITH A COMMUNITY. We attempted to manipulate the community people identified with, by asking them to think about either their identity as a Queenslander, as an Australian, or to think about their neighbourhood. People were asked to list some of the social values, attitudes or traits common to that community. A fourth group were not provided with any instructions as to thinking about a community. However, we found that the manipulation was not effective. People who were in the different community groups did not rate that identity to be more important that the other identities, which should have been the case if this manipulation had worked.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES, POLITICAL EFFICACY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION. We then measured people’s environmental attitudes (how important they rated protecting the environment), their sense of efficacy in impacting government (i.e., how much control they thought they had on government decisions), and whether or not they engaged in a host of environmental behaviours in the last six months. About 74% had positive attitudes to protecting the environment, but only 41% felt they had some control over governments’ political decisions.

In terms of actions, we identified two clusters of responses: 7 political actions (attending rallies, signing petitions, etc.) and 16 personal actions (conserving water, energy, recycling, trying to reduce waste etc.). On average, in the last six months people had engaged in only 1 of the 7 political actions, and most were unsure whether they would engage in such actions in the next six months. However, people had engaged an average of 8 or 9 of the 16 personal environmental behaviours, and most people intended to undertake these kinds of actions in the near future.

We found people who had more positive attitudes to the environment were more likely to engage in all the behaviours, as you would expect. We thought that political efficacy would be linked to more political action, but strangely this was not the case. People who thought they had more control over government were not more likely to engage in environmental actions of any type.

3. LINKS BETWEEN COMMUNITY IDENTITY, ATTITUDES, ACTIONS AND EFFICACY. Contrary to our expectations, there was no difference in the behaviour or attitudes of people who were in the different identity conditions. That is, asking people to think about different community identities did not affect their stated environmental attitudes or their behaviours or intentions. There was also no difference across the identity groups in term of their beliefs about the political efficacy of citizens.

4. NEIGHBOURHOOD, STATE, AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND NORMS. Finally, we asked everyone to rate how important the national, state and neighbourhood identities were to them, and how important protecting the environment was to ‘average’ people in each community. 76% rated the national identity important and 56% thought protecting the environment was important to the average Australian. 63% rated the
Queensland identity important, and 58% thought protecting the environment was important to the average Queenslander. Only 41% through the neighbourhood identity was important, and 54% through protecting the environment was important to the average person in the neighbourhood.

When we relate these identities and norms to attitudes and action, we find that in general the more people see others as pro-environment, the more positive attitudes people have to protecting the environment. The community manipulation did not affect the relationship between people’s attitudes and their beliefs about others’ attitudes.

Considered together, national and neighbourhood identities were more important than the state level: People who identify with Australia and see neighbours as more pro-environment have more positive attitudes to protecting the environment. Identifying with communities that support the environment may lead to political action, but in the present study the pattern of results is not very clear.

CONCLUSION

In this study we were hoping to show that when people’s community identities are manipulated they are more likely to report attitudes and behaviours reflecting the norms of that community. However, the attempt to manipulate experienced identity was not effective, as shown by stable reported identities and norms across the conditions. Despite this, the study did reveal relationships between people’s environmental attitudes, behaviours and intentions. People who thought others were more pro-environment were more likely to have pro-environment attitudes themselves, which in turn meant that they were more likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours. Overall, people were more likely to engage in personal environmentally friendly behaviours than political environmental behaviours. It is also interesting that although generally people intended to engage in personal, environmentally positive behaviours, people on average actually engaged in only about half of the behaviours listed.

In future research, we will continue to follow up the antecedents of positive environmental attitudes and actions, either through a better experimental manipulation of identity or by trying to get a clearer picture of the naturally emergent identities in that context.

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!