How neutralization theory can explain the concern-behaviour gap in pro-environmental decision making

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Introduction

- "concern-behavior-gap" (Tam & Chan 2017) reflects weak or ambiguous relationship between pro-environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior
- Low-Cost hypothesis – pro-environmental behavior only under the condition of low behavioral costs
- either implies a negative interaction effect between environmental concern and behavioral costs (Diekmann & Preisendörfer 2003) or not (Best & Kroneberg 2012; Tutic, Voss & Liebe 2017)
- varying evidence, dependent on model choice, LCH tried to reconcile results, but has raised additional question

Theory

Why is the concern-behavior gap persistent?

- pro-environmental actions to mitigate climate change represents collective action problem
- contributions depend on values and convictions, which follow hierarchical order, internal and external constraints subject to deliberation (Opp 1999)
- necessary to account for the normative desirability of going green (Keuschnigg & Kraatz 2019), for dissonance avoidance (Festinger 1954), hence for the psychological costs or negative emotions (Steg et al. 2014) of free-riding

Theory of Neutralization

- Sykes & Matza (1957) expanded theory to explain white-collar crime
- why do actors break the law despite showing general norm acceptance?
- they neutralize norm violations ex-ante

Context of pro-environmental actions

- previous attempts on very small samples or qualitative in nature (Schahn et al. 1995; Chatzidakis et al 2007; Gruber & Schleglmilch 2014)
- Best & Kroneberg (2012: 557): "The costliness of a situation motivates actors not only to choose actions that weigh the relevant incentives, but also to search for a definition of the situation that neutralizes the feelings of obligation resulting from their own environmental awareness."
- "…According to Diekmann and Preisendörfer, this is relatively easy in the environmental sphere, since actors can point to their own powerlessness in the face of the collective action problem or to contributions already made in the form of other (less costly) ecological behaviors." (our translation)

Five techniques of neutralization

Our measures from the GESIS Panel (wave ddbk)

- **denial of responsibility** – "No matter how you act as a consumer, environmental destruction will continue."
- **appeal to higher loyalties** – "For the sake of my family, I cannot afford to make large expenditures for environmental protection."
- **condemning the condemners** – "Many self-proclaimed environmentalists are hypocrites."
- **denial of injury**– "The environmental damage caused by me personally is minimal."
- **denial of victim** – "Today, because of environmental protection, many things are unnecessarily banned."

Data and Methods

- data from 5 waves of the GESIS panel (2015-2019)

Outcome measure

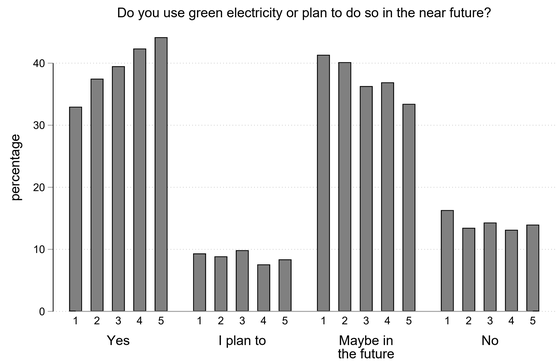

Figure 1. Do you have a renewable energy contract or do you intent to purchase one in the near future? Answers from 5 waves (n=3445). Source: Best & Dannwolf (2015)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and measurement of the outcome variable

Response	Value	Coding Model 1	Coding Model 2*	total n	total %
Yes, I already use	1	1	1	5.149	33.00
I plan to	2	0	0	1.164	7.46
Maybe in the future	3	0	0	4.975	31.88
No	4	0	.	1.880	12.05
Don't know	5	.	.	2.436	15.61
Total (n=3445)				15.604	100.00

* Results from model 2 not shown

Explanatory variables

- environmental concern: mean score from 9 items of Diekmann-Preisendörfer-scale (RMSEA=0.078; SRMR=0.043; $\alpha = 0.88$)
- normative expectations: mean score from 2 items reflecting expectations by friend/family of purchasing green energy products
- neutralization: mean score from 7 items (RMSEA=0.070; CFI=0.956; SRMR=0.035; $\alpha = 0.88$)
- adjusted net-equivalent household income (logs taken and mean centered)
- sex, age, age^2 and wave dummies

Results I

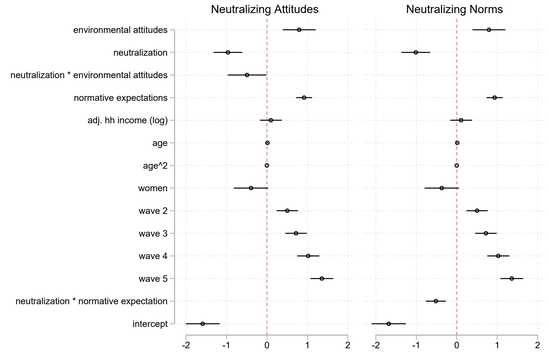

Figure 2. Estimation results from two multilevel logistic regression models with varying intercepts

Results II

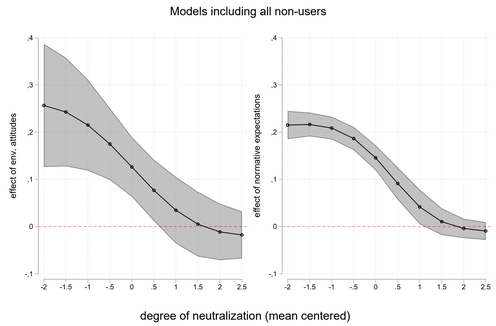

Figure 3. Conditional effect plot of the average marginal interaction effect between neutralization and environm. concern (left) and normative expectations (right)

Conclusion & Limitations

- env. concern and normative expectations will only guide action if no possibility of neutralization is available or learned
- other explanations besides neutralization possible, e.g. status quo bias when signing green energy contracts

References

Download the references on github.

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