

# Social Identity and the Environment: The Influence of Group Processes on Environmentally Sustainable Behaviour

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The state of the natural environment is a topic of increasing concern, with climate change, loss of biodiversity, and diminishing natural resources all posing eminent threats to the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. Much of this environmental degradation is caused by human behaviour that can be changed. Psychologists have realised their role in understanding and influencing pro-environmental behaviours to help (see Chapter 1). Most psychological research of environmental behaviour has focused on the individual person as the unit of analysis. While this has been helpful, less attention has been given to how group memberships, and the social influences these create, affect environmental behaviour. Because environmental behaviour often occurs within a social context, understanding the social element may be critically important to promoting environmentally sustainable behaviour (see Chapter 2). Using the social identity approach, this research investigates how various aspects of social group membership interact with individual attributes to influence environmental behaviour. Three related strands of research explore this issue (see Chapter 3 for an overview).

In Chapter 4, two studies (Studies 1 and 2) examined how group feedback in the form of social comparisons affect individual behaviour. Based on social identity theory, it was predicted that positive social comparisons would lead to more positive behaviour, and less positive comparisons to less positive behaviour, especially among individuals who identified strongly with the target ingroup. Results from both studies found some support for these hypotheses on certain (but not all) behavioural dependent measures, both at the time of manipulation and one week later. This supports the notion that individual social identification strength can moderate behavioural response to group-level feedback on environmental topics.

In Chapter 5, Study 3 considered how interaction within groups via discussion might induce group norms about environmental behaviour that over-ride the effects of intergroup comparisons. A design similar to Study 1 was used, with the addition of a small-group discussion following the feedback manipulation. Discussion content was hypothesised to predict environmental behaviour, with the feedback manipulation having less impact than in Study 1. Results found that the more participants discussed environmental behaviours, the more they engaged in them one week later. This effect was independent of pre-existing environmental values, suggesting that the effects of group interaction were not merely a reflection of existing individual orientations. Following the discussion, values were also found to be very strong predictors of behaviour, a result not found in Study 1, suggesting that group interaction not only shapes individual behaviour but also reduces the classic value-action gap. Together, these findings point to the powerful role that intra-group interaction can play in forming norms of environmental behaviour and shaping individual responses.

In Chapter 6, two studies (Studies 4 and 5) explored how comparisons within a group over time (i.e., intra-group comparisons) may function differently to comparisons between groups (i.e., inter-group comparisons), which were explored in Chapter 4. Based on the findings in Chapter 4, positive intergroup comparisons were predicted to result in more positive individual intentions, whereas negative intergroup comparisons were expected to result in reduced intentions. With respect to intra-group comparisons, however, the opposite pattern of effects was predicted. The results of Study 4 did not support these hypotheses. However, feedback from participants suggested that the experimental design may have produced reactance. To address this, Study 5 made use of a revised design, and the results of this study indicated support for the hypotheses. Importantly, in addition to negative and positive comparisons having opposing effects depending on whether these were intra- or inter-group, the processes behind these

effects also differed. The effects of intra-group comparisons were mediated by shared responsibility whereas the effects of intergroup comparisons were mediated by environmental value centrality.

These results are integrated and discussed in Chapter 7. The recurring theme of these results is that group-level feedback can interact with individual-level variables in subtle but powerful ways, leading to differing outcomes of environmental behaviour. These findings highlight the socially imbedded nature of individual environmental actions, and suggest new avenues for theoretical and practical work in the environmental domain. In particular, on the basis of the studies included in this thesis it is recommended that psychologists who are interested in understanding and changing individual environmental behaviour should incorporate an understanding of intra- and inter-group processes into their theorising and future research.

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## – PUBLICATIONS RELEVANT TO THE THESIS –

Study 5 forms the basis for part of the following book chapter:

Rabinovich, A., Morton, T., & Duke, C. C. (in press). Collective self and individual choice: The role of social comparisons in promoting public engagement with climate change. In L. Whitmarsh, S. O'Neill, & I. Lorenzoni (Eds.), *Engaging the public with climate change: Behaviour change and communication*. Earthscan.

A manuscript based on Study 5 was submitted for publication in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, and has been invited for revision and resubmission:

Duke, C. C., Morton, T. A., & Smith, J. R. (under review). *Better or worse than who? Different types of comparisons lead to different paths of environmental behaviour*.

Both of these publications draw on the same study, which was designed, conducted, and analysed by the candidate under the supervision of Thomas Morton and Joanne Smith. While the book chapter was authored by Anna Rabinovich, making reference to the data from this thesis, the manuscript reporting the study was authored primarily by the candidate, as indicated by first authorship.

– STATEMENT OF THE SUPERVISORS’  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO CO-AUTHORED PAPERS –

As outlined in the candidate’s statement above, published work to date has focussed on the data reported in Study 5. In the manuscript that reports this study (currently under review), the candidate took the lead role. This includes preparing the literature review, designing and executing the study, statistical analysis and interpretation of the data, and the ultimate write-up for publication. The first supervisor contributed to the papers by advising on statistical analysis and interpretation, relevant literature, and writing style. The second supervisor also read and commented on drafts of the manuscript. The candidate is also listed as a co-author on a chapter prepared by Anna Rabinovich. This chapter summarises the results of a larger project on social identity processes on environmental behaviour, one section of which summarises key findings from the candidate’s work. Co-authorship on this work acknowledges the candidate’s contribution to this larger research project and their role in preparing the summary of their specific findings. Moreover, the theoretical framing of the empirical work presented in this thesis and the arrangement of the papers was a product of concerted discussions of the thesis content between the candidate and the supervisors.

Dr. Thomas Morton

Dr. Joanne Smith