

Never change a running system: How system justification and psychological distance affect environmental concern

Thursday, 12 September 2024 15:10 (20 minutes)

The urgency of environmental issues, notably climate change, demands a nuanced understanding of the psychological barriers and enablers of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. Our study delves into the psychological underpinnings of environmental concern, a pivotal gateway to pro-environmental behaviors, focusing on the interplay between system justification theory and construal level theory. We hypothesize that individuals with a strong system justification trait perceive environmental problems to be psychologically distant, which leads to diminished environmental concern. Expanding on this, we anticipate that external threats to the system exacerbate this effect. However, we posit that strategically reducing psychological distance, e.g. through targeted manipulations, can counterbalance this negative effect. We test our hypotheses in three empirical studies: Study 1 shows that a strong system justification trait leads to a high psychological distance to environmental problems and low environmental concern. Study 2 builds on this foundation and demonstrates that experimentally induced threats to the system reinforce the negative effect of a strong system justification trait on environmental concern via psychological distance. Finally, Study 3 showcases that experimentally reducing psychological distance weakens the negative connection between a system justification trait and environmental concern. Overall, our research develops a comprehensive framework to explain variations in environmental concern by linking system justification and construal level theory. Importantly, we introduce interventions to reduce the negative effect of a strong system justification trait on environmental concern. Understanding these psychological mechanisms is pivotal for policymakers and communicators seeking effective strategies to bolster environmental attitudes and actions.

Are you currently an Early Career Researcher?

No

Primary authors: CHRISTANDL, Fabian; JASINENKO, Anna (University of St. Gallen, Switzerland); GRUBERT, Thorben (HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management)

Presenter: CHRISTANDL, Fabian

Session Classification: Talk Session 2

Track Classification: Environmental Psychology