

Cultures within a Culture: The role of nationality and religion for environmentally significant behaviour in students living in University accommodation

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Reducing global warming cannot be achieved through technological interventions alone; it requires a change in human behaviour. Households are a major contributor to carbon emissions, and thus play an integral part in strategies aiming at a more sustainable living. Behaviour changes in the household can make a significant contribution towards reducing CO₂ emissions. However, people vary strongly in their household practices; differences in behaviour account for a substantial amount of variance in heat, electricity, and water consumption (Gill et al., 2010). What causes these differences? In addition to age and education, nationality and religion play a role: They impact on physical aspects of well-being and on environmental attitudes (e.g., Isaacs et al., 2010; Guth et al., 1995). The physical aspect such as perception of warmth is of importance insofar as that comfort practices could influence on environmentally significant behaviour. The Eurobarometer 295 (2008), a study on the attitudes of European citizens towards the environment, also revealed differences in attitudes and behaviour of Europeans towards the environment.

Therefore, steps to promote more sustainable living have to be adapted to different cultures. Rising globalization brings about more heterogeneous populations, meaning that there will be increasingly “cultures within a culture”. An important question is what happens to cultural differences in environmentally significant behaviour in such a setting. It could be that differences are diluted by a largely shared environment, or that they continue to persist, thanks to being deeply rooted in one’s origin and to the non-shared part of the environment.

Our study

The aim of this study was to examine the variation in pro-environmental attitudes, behaviour, and values in members of a community now living in a very similar setting but coming from diverse backgrounds. If personal background accounts for differences in the variables at stake, then this has important implications, e.g. for all national interventions launched to change behaviour.

Data was collected through a web-based survey. The survey was sent out to first-year students living in university accommodation at the University of Greenwich. Religion, strength of religion, nationality, years living in the UK, program studied, gender and age were recorded and the impact of these variables on a variety of measures such as pro-environmental attitudes, values, and actual behaviour was assessed.

Results are currently being analysed but preliminary data suggest that sub-culture does play a role and thus needs to be considered when developing carbon reduction interventions. The implications of these findings for the University and national policies are discussed.

References

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