

Why do women care more about the environment than men?



Research

'Does personality mediate the relationship between sex and environmentalism?'

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Background

Combating climate change requires that we understand why some people participate in sustainable behaviour and others do not.

A consistent finding in psychological research is that females care more about environmental issues and engage in more conservation behaviours than males. Understanding why this is the case has become an important question for psychologists. Demographic variables such as age, education, political orientation and income have been unable to explain this link. However, personality traits vary between males and females and are also linked to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, contributed to research looking at whether personality traits explain why women have stronger environmental attitudes and engage in more sustainable behaviours than men.

Main research findings

In support of previous research, females had stronger attitudes towards protecting the environment and less favourable attitudes towards utilizing the environment than males. Females were also more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours.

In all three studies, females were more conscientious (i.e. goal directed, organized) than males. These personality differences partly explained why females were more likely to support environmental protection and less likely to support environmental utilization. Conscientiousness also explained why females were more likely to participate in pro-environmental behaviours than males. Looking at differences in masculine and feminine traits also showed the same result—those who were more feminine were more conscientious and more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

The findings indicate that personality differences between men and women influence their environmental attitudes, which in turn, influence their environmental behaviour.

Over three studies, personality differences in conscientiousness explained why women had stronger environmental attitudes and were more likely to participate in sustainable behaviours than men. Further research should look into the role of agreeableness and neuroticism in the relationship between sex and environmentalism.

The findings suggest that a lack of conscientiousness in men may be partly responsible for environmental degradation. Therefore, initiatives focused on increasing environmental attitudes and behaviours should focus on ways to increase conscientiousness—particularly in men. Furthermore, the findings reinforce the importance of targeting men when promoting pro-environmental messages whilst also highlighting the importance of women as leaders of the global sustainable movement.

Lastly, one finding reported that the personality traits of agreeableness (i.e. kindness, honesty) and neuroticism (i.e. emotionality, moodiness) may also explain why females are more likely to endorse environmental protection but this was not consistent across studies.