Science for Environment Policy

Commitment encourages green behaviour, but we need more insight into why

A new study indicates that ‘commitment’ interventions are effective in encouraging environmentally-friendly behaviour, both in the short- and long-term. However, to increase the effectiveness of such interventions, whereby people promise or pledge to perform certain behaviours, more research is needed on the psychological processes behind their effects.

The impact of our individual behaviours, such as energy-use, transport and recycling, has a large collective effect on the environment. As such, it is important to encourage pro-environmental behaviours that reduce harm to, or even benefit, the environment. A method believed to produce substantial and long-lasting behaviour change is commitment, whereby people promise or pledge to perform a desired behaviour, such as cutting energy use or switching to greener forms of transport.

The study analysed existing research on the effects of commitment and explored the psychological processes behind them. The analysis included 19 studies that researched behaviours including recycling, taking the bus, shower use and electricity use.

All studies showed that commitment interventions had a significant effect on people’s behaviour, compared to when they had not made a commitment. This was the case when commitment was used on its own as a behavioural change method, and when it was combined with other methods, such as providing feedback on behaviour. Moreover, the commitment effect occurred both during and after the intervention and, in the small number of studies where a comparison could be made, commitment had longer-lasting effects than other interventions.

Despite the evidence of the effectiveness of commitment, there is no research into the psychological processes that lead to this effect. The study identified certain processes that may be responsible for the commitment effect, such as considering oneself as consistent and the influence of others, i.e. social norms, but it suggests that further research is needed to design interventions to activate these processes.

The study reiterated the four general features of commitment that increase the chances of long-term behavioural change, as devised by Cialdini (2001)1. Firstly, commitment should be active rather than passive, for example, it could involve writing a statement. Secondly, it should be made in public or have potential to be made public. Thirdly, the commitment should involve effort or be difficult, for example, where a recycling bin requires payment. Lastly, the commitment should be perceived as voluntary or internally-motivated.

The researchers added more recommendations to these four general suggestions by Cialdini to improve the success of commitment interventions:

- Use commitment in combination with other interventions
- Keep the commitment prominent in a person’s life, for example, through physical reminders, such as notes on energy saving and recycling
- Activate personal values or norms, for example, if someone already favours reduced car use, this can be activated through reminder signs in public places
- Activate social norms, for example, a group of people could make a commitment together
- Label people positively when they perform a pro-environmental behaviour, for example, they could be described as ‘public-spirited’
- Make the commitment specific in terms of the frequency, timing and location of the behaviour
- Make the behaviour fun, for example, by emphasising the enjoyable aspects of public transport, such as relaxation or freedom to read

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