



Influencing green behaviour through environmental goal priming: The mediating role of automatic evaluation



Kelly Tate^{a,*}, Andrew J. Stewart^a, Michael Daly^b

^aSchool of Psychological Sciences, Coupland 1 Building, Coupland Street, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, United Kingdom

^bBehavioural Science Centre, Stirling Management School, Cottrell Building, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Scotland, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 3 March 2014

Keywords:

Environment
Goal priming
Consumer behaviour
Automatic evaluation
Implicit attitudes
Environmental behaviours

ABSTRACT

Understanding how pro-environmental messages may influence behaviour is key to promoting sustainable consumer choice. Research suggests that people automatically evaluate objects as a function of their instrumentality to satisfying active goals. We hypothesized that priming an environmental-protection goal through exposure to a pro-environmental message would produce more positive automatic evaluations and lead people to make the pro-environmental choice of selecting loose rather than packaged products in a hypothetical choice task. As predicted, those primed with an environmental-protection goal automatically evaluated loose products more positively and selected more loose consumer products than a control group. Increased implicit positivity towards loose products mediated the observed behaviour change. Crucially, the effect of environmental goal priming on choices or implicit attitudes towards packaging was not contingent on existing environmental attitudes. Our findings suggest that pro-environmental messages could induce more environmentally friendly consumer choice by leading people to evaluate readily available goal-relevant stimuli positively.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In response to global environmental problems such as climate change, biodiversity losses and resource shortages, policymakers are increasingly interested in encouraging people to adopt more sustainable behaviours. The UK were the first country to introduce a long-term framework for mitigation and adaptation under the 2008 Climate Change Act (HM Government, 2008), which stipulates an 80% reduction in UK emissions relative to 1990 levels by 2050. While technological innovations such as renewable energies, nuclear power and CO₂ capture and storage have been earmarked by policymakers as potential solutions (de Coninck, Fischer, Newell, & Ueno, 2008), in the absence of wide scale behaviour change, such targets are unlikely to be realised (Chapman, 2007). This is partially because any technologically attributed gains in energy saving tend to be offset by consumption growth (Midden, Kaiser, & McCalley, 2007). Human choice is therefore key to reducing emissions and producing sustainable consumption patterns.

1.1. Behaviourally based solutions

Behaviourally based changes have the potential to produce quick and cost-effective reductions in carbon emissions (Behavioural Insights Team, 2011). Yet, attempts to enhance pro-environmental behaviour and to capitalise on favourable consumer attitudes are often met with limited success (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). A likely reason for this is that whilst people hold positive attitudes towards protecting the environment and intend to engage in pro-environmental behaviours, their attitudes and intentions do not align closely with their actual behaviour (e.g., Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Nigbur, Lyons, & Uzzell, 2010). Understanding the disconnect between explicitly stated intentions to protect the environment (stated preferences) and actual behaviour (revealed preference) is key to developing effective pro-environmental policies. One explanation for this disconnect is that despite looming large during attitude surveys, the salience of environmental goals may be undermined by other more proximal goals and subsequently diminish over time. For example, an intention to reduce packaging consumption may lapse when the supermarket is about to close and grabbing a pre-packaged bag of carrots or apples is the faster option. The notion that competing motivations may undermine long-term goals is supported by theories about temporal constraints on goal-directed behaviour.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0) 161 275 2589.

E-mail addresses: Kelly.Tate@manchester.ac.uk (K. Tate), Andrew.J.Stewart@manchester.ac.uk (A.J. Stewart), Michael.Daly@stir.ac.uk (M. Daly).

1.2. Goal activation

As described in temporal construal theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998), competing motivations evolve and change over time with short-term goals often acting to undermine long-term goals. This is because we tend to process temporally distant events abstractly, whereas proximal events are construed in more concrete terms. Hence, while environmental considerations receive heavy weighting when contemplating decisions about future events (e.g., future purchase decisions during environmental attitude surveys), other motivations may more heavily guide behaviour during decision-making for proximal events, e.g., monetary constraints or a product's functional, rather than environmental, characteristics (Gupta & Sen, 2013). Similarly, theories on goal-gradients propose that the strength of goal activation increases as a function of physical (e.g., Hull, 1932) or temporal (Lewin, 1935; Markman & Brendl, 2000) proximity to the goal, suggesting that short-term goals may undermine long-term goals. Therefore, people may struggle to satisfy long-term, abstract environmental goals that compete with more strongly active proximal goals (Markman & Brendl, 2000).

This study suggests that whilst long-term pro-environmental goals tend to lose out to, and be overruled by salient short-term goals, goals can be reactivated by exposure to goal relevant cues, producing behaviour in line with the goal. It is well established in social psychological research that goals can be activated consciously and nonconsciously, and operate automatically to guide behaviour, perceptions and judgements (Förster, Liberman, & Friedman, 2007). Goal activation effects have been observed across multiple domains. For example, in the domain of health, implicitly activating a thinness goal through subliminal exposure to the words 'thin,' and 'small,' caused participants to consume fewer cookies (Ferguson, 2007). It follows that exposing people to cues which activate pro-environmental goals could lead to more environmentally sustainable behaviour.

Evidence regarding the activation of environmental goals is currently lacking. However, the notion that motivational constructs can be experimentally activated which produce environmental behaviour is supported by research on priming environmental values. Verplanken and Holland (2002) found that priming environmental values increased hypothetical choices of environmentally friendly televisions. Value-congruent behaviour occurred only as a function of priming; participants for whom environmental values were central to the self did not behave in line with their values unless these were activated, suggesting that environmental motivations require cognitive activation in order to influence behaviour. Similarly, Biel, Dahlstrand, and Grankvist (2005) enhanced the salience of environmental values through exposure to a poster, increasing choices of green product alternatives in a computer-simulated supermarket.

1.3. Value and goal activation

Values, similarly to goals, are conceptualised as motivational constructs. They are often described as 'higher order' or 'abstract' goals that serve as guiding principles in life (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Goals are conceptualised as cognitive representations of a desired endpoint which people strive to attain (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001; Kruglanski et al., 2002). Thus, one difference between values and goals is their level of specificity. Because values are general principles that transcend situations (Schwartz, 1992), it has been claimed that they are often further away from behaviour than goals (Jolibert & Baumgartner, 1997), which are more specific in their construal, comprising behavioural plans, knowledge and evaluations (Kopetz, Kruglanski, Arens, Etkin, & Johnson, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2002).

While people strive to attain or satisfy goals, values 'guide' behaviour but are not pursued or attained.

Value activation manipulations typically involve providing cues to activate the abstract representation of the value, i.e., 'the environment.' For example, Verplanken and Holland (2002) exposed participants to environmental values in an impression formation task, and words semantically related to the environment (e.g., 'green' and 'nature') in a scrambled sentence task. Similarly, Biel et al., (2005) exposed participants to a poster of a cow in a field, activating the mental representation of 'nature'. Like values, goals can be primed through exposure to cues which activate their abstract representation (Kruglanski et al., 2002). The similarity of methods used to activate both goals and values (i.e., SSTs, impression formation tasks) can make it difficult to empirically distinguish between these constructs. However, because goals are hierarchically represented, comprising interconnected goals and means (Kruglanski et al., 2002), they can be activated by exposure to lower level means to achieve the goal (Janiszewski & Van Osselaer, 2005); e.g., reduce household waste; consume less packaging.

We therefore propose that increasing the salience of specific environmental goals during decision-making, thus locating environmental considerations in the 'here and now', could assist the attainment of environmental goals, ultimately leading to more environmentally sustainable choices. To ensure that our manipulation was goal rather than value orientated, we used a pro-environmental message which focussed on the specific goal of waste reduction. Thus, rather than activating the abstract concept of the environment, our goal prime stimulus focused on behavioural means to satisfy environmental goals (i.e., waste reduction). Furthermore, we aimed to identify the specific mechanism underpinning the relationship between goal activation and behaviour, building on research by Ferguson and colleagues (Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson & Bargh, 2004) who have shown automatic evaluation¹ to play a functional role in supporting goal pursuit.

1.4. Mechanisms linking goal activation and behaviour

Recent work on goal pursuit has demonstrated that experimentally activated goals result in temporary changes in the automatic evaluation of objects instrumental to goal attainment (e.g., Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson & Bargh, 2004; Moore, Ferguson, & Chartrand, 2011). Ferguson coined the term "evaluative readiness" to describe this well-documented phenomenon illustrating the malleability of automatic evaluation following goal activation. Conceptually similar to Lewin (1935), who argued that objects were evaluated as a function of their instrumentality to satisfying needs, and Markman's goal compatibility framework (Markman & Brendl, 2000), evaluative readiness suggests that the automatic evaluation of an object is contingent on the object's utility to goal attainment. In one demonstration, Ferguson and Bargh (2004) found that when an achievement goal was activated by reading task instructions, participants displayed more implicit positivity towards objects instrumental to satisfying this goal. Similarly, cigarette deprived smokers automatically evaluated smoking paraphernalia more positively than smoking unrelated items (Sherman, Rose, Koch, Presson, & Chassin, 2003). However, this effect did not occur for participants who had recently smoked, demonstrating that goal dependent automatic evaluation effects are confined to currently, rather than recently active goals.

¹ The terms "automatic evaluation" and "implicit attitudes" are both commonly used in the literature to describe attitudes that are automatically activated. We use these terms interchangeably throughout the paper.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7246262>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7246262>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)