

Why Do Some People Change Their Lifestyle to Help the Climate?

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Introduction

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions requires changes in everyday behaviour. Two of the most important areas where individuals can reduce their carbon footprint are how they travel and what they eat. However, despite widespread worry about climate change, only some people have made changes to these behaviours.

This study examines the psychological journey behind such changes. It investigates why some people progress from thinking about climate change to forming an intention to change, and why some then go on to take action. The research treats behaviour change as a process with different stages, rather than a simple choice between acting and not acting. It explores which attitudes, beliefs and individual characteristics are associated with forming intentions and changing behaviour for transport and diet.

Data and methods

A nationally representative sample of 1,200 adults completed an online survey about their transport and diet habits, whether they had already changed their behaviour to reduce their carbon footprint, whether they planned to do so or whether they saw no need to change. Respondents also answered questions

about a range of climate-related beliefs and attitudes, including how much they worry about climate change, their sense of moral responsibility, whether they see themselves as someone who acts environmentally and what they believe about the effectiveness of individual and collective action. The analysis compared people at different stages of change and tested which factors were most strongly associated with forming intentions and taking action.

Results

The factors linked to behaviour change differed depending on both the domain of the behaviour and the stage of change.

For transport behaviour, people who were more worried about climate change and felt a stronger moral obligation to act were more likely to intend to change how they travel. However, these factors were not strongly linked to actually taking action. Instead, action was associated with having a strong environmental identity and living in an urban area, where alternatives to private car use are generally more available.

For dietary behaviour, climate worry and moral obligation were associated with both intentions and action. People were also more likely to intend to change their diets if they believed that collective action could make a difference. Taking action was strongly linked to environmental identity. Women and younger adults were more likely than men and older adults to be further along the behaviour-change process for diet.

A notable finding was that some factors commonly discussed in previous research, such as perceptions of what others are doing and perceptions of individual responsibility, showed little relationship with behaviour change once other variables were controlled for.

Conclusions

People who are more worried about climate change and feel a moral responsibility to reduce emissions are most likely to intend to change their behaviour. However, turning intentions into action is more closely linked to seeing oneself as an environmentally-minded person and, in the case of transport, having practical opportunities to change behaviour. Highlighting the risks posed by climate change may encourage people to think about changing their behaviour, but helping them to act on their intentions is likely to require different supports, such as infrastructure and opportunities for sustainable choices, as well as

efforts that encourage people to see environmental protection as part of who they are.