

COMMON CAUSE BRIEFING

Don't Mind the Gap Between Values and Action

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No adequate response to the profound and inter-connected social and environmental problems that we confront will be possible without an understanding of human values and how these contribute to shaping our behaviour. But sometimes, responding to such understanding can feel like being caught between an irresistible force and an immovable object.

The irresistible force is provided by every political party, especially near elections, because they all argue for the importance of values. For example, on the topic of multiculturalism, Tony Blair famously stated, "Integration is not about culture or lifestyle, . . . it is about values. It is about integrating at the point of shared, common unifying British values. " Later, Gordon Brown accepted his position in Number 10 claiming "All I believe and all I try to do come from the values that I grew up with - duty, honesty, hard work, family." Most recently, the current prime minister pledged upon accepting office that, "Above all it will be a Government that is built on some clear values, values of freedom, values of fairness and values of responsibility." Such high-placed support for the importance of values must embolden any attempts to argue that they matter.

But this is where campaigners meet the immovable object. When they take a cue from the politicians and try to argue for a pro-environmental and pro-social change in values, policy makers and some academics often say that values don't matter. Like apocalyptic naysayers, they point to surveys revealing an ostensible chasm between values and actions. For example, people wish to protect the environment, but often fail to perform very simple green behaviours, like purchasing low-energy light bulbs and ditching the car for small journeys (e.g., [Webster & Riddell, 2006](#)).

I used to be encouraged by people's attention to these apparent discrepancies, as I specialize in studying the psychological processes that help people to bridge values and actions. Others' recognition of the gap between values and action reassured me that the issue is important and worth studying. Somewhere along the way, however, this recognition has turned into a potentially paralysing cultural truism; a negotiable value-action gap became something that is seen as unbridgeable.

Perhaps the transformation began 10 years ago, when the government started blaming the public for rising obesity rates. They suggested that the problem arises because of individual choices: individuals value health but fail to make choices that reflect this value. Somehow, we had to find a way to change choices: This theme persists in the present coalition government. In their outline for a new coalition government, [Cameron and Clegg \(2010\)](#) argued that:

“There has been the assumption that central government can only change people’s behaviour through rules and regulations. Our government will be a much smarter one, shunning the bureaucratic levers of the past and finding intelligent ways to encourage, support and enable people to make better choices for themselves.”

The backlash to this retreat from policy intervention has been intense. Critics could easily point to swaths of evidence that choice matters little when the choices are constrained. In a government report on Lifestyle Change, several psychologists and I emphasized that our environment shapes our choices (see [Maio et al., 2007](#)). It would be very difficult to exercise and eat right if you live in an economically deprived area, have to work long hours in a seated position, and return home to a lack of green space, poor public recreation facilities, and an abundance of cheap, calorific food. Even worse, you might be at odds with the unhealthy habits of your own family, friends, and culture.

At some point in this backlash, however, people started going too far. They began to say that values do not matter – that it is only the choice architecture that is of importance. In arguing this, critics pointed to decades-old evidence indicating that we often fail to act as we intend. But they gravely misunderstood the evidence, and, unfortunately, the resulting mythos has spread widely. On several occasions, I’ve even seen senior figures in marketing or policy who, despite being only peripherally aware of the relevant evidence, state matter-of-factly that a closely relevant construct to values, attitudes, do not predict behaviour.

In social psychological research, attitudes are tendencies to evaluate something positively or negatively. When the “thing” being evaluated is an abstract ideal (e.g., protecting the environment), the attitude is very similar to researchers’ conceptualizations of values. Thus, at one meeting I attended, the speaker on this issue pointed to a 40-year old review of research on correspondence between people’s attitudes and their behaviour. [Wicker’s \(1969\)](#) review found very little match between measures of attitude and measures of behaviour, so he called for more research examining reasons for their non-correspondence.

Well, some social scientists seem to have stopped reading about attitudes and values at that point, because they missed the subsequent 40 years of psychological research addressing the issue that Wicker raised. If they read one of the more recent reviews ([Albarracín, Johnson, Fishbein, & Muellerleile, 2001](#); [Kraus, 1995](#)), they’d see that researchers often find strong correspondence between attitudes and behaviour – it’s not perfect correspondence, but it is much higher than critics seem to suggest. In fact, nowadays, this high correspondence is accepted even among the more ardent critics of mainstream research on attitudes (in quibbles about theoretical interpretations of the evidence).

There are at least a dozen important reasons why the studies prior to Wicker had failed to find this correspondence. All had to do with significant failings in measurement, study design, and theory. In the early-70s, a number of researchers noted one factor that stands head and shoulders above them all. Put simply, the

past research had failed to remember that a key reason for investigating attitudes (and values) is that they are more abstract than the behaviours we try to predict from them. For example, it's not interesting for us to ask people how they feel about eating an orange at 7 o'clock in the morning a week from now. It's more interesting to ask people how they feel about eating fruit, or even about how they feel about healthier eating. These more abstract topics are more interesting because they potentially predict a *broad* range of behaviours. If you know how someone feels about fruit, you can predict a variety of relevant behaviours.

Crucially, this asset of abstract attitudes (and values) is also their undoing. My wife loves fruit, but it doesn't make much sense to ask her whether she likes fruit and then use this attitude to predict whether she will eat an orange at a particular time one morning next week. She might miss this opportunity for many reasons that have little to do with a failure of the attitude: we might have run out of oranges the day before, we might have had no time for breakfast, or she may be in the mood for cereal instead. [Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen \(1974\)](#) famously pointed out that, if you want to see whether abstract opinions matter, you must assess a variety of relevant behaviours and not just one.

There is ample evidence in support of this idea. A great example arrived just seven years after Wicker's review. [Weigel and Newman \(1976\)](#) were interested in predicting actions that protect the environment. Residents of a small New England town were given 16 survey questions probing their general concern about protecting the environment. Three to eight months later, three new individuals contacted the residents and presented them with 14 different actions to help protect the environment. Participants were given a chance to sign and circulate several petitions (combating off-shore oil drilling, nuclear power, and auto exhaust emissions), participate in a litter pick-up program, and take part in a recycling scheme.

[Weigel and Newman \(1976\)](#) predicted that the match between people's environmental concern and their subsequent actions to protect the environment would become higher as the statistical analysis expanded to include more behaviours. The results strongly supported their hypothesis. The general measure of environmental concern was a weak predictor of any particular action that participants had the chance to perform, but a much better predictor of sets of behaviours. For example, environmental concern explained only 1% of the residents' actual recycling in the fifth week of the program, but was 15 times more effective at predicting recycling behaviour across an eight-week period. The predictive power more than doubled again when the researchers examined the association between environmental concern and all environmental protection actions combined (including petitioning, recycling, and litter collection). In the final analysis, environmental concern predicted 36% of environmentally friendly action – a very strong relation according to conventional wisdom for social science research (i.e., not many variables do better than this).

In fact, during the 30 years since Weigel and Newman's study, researchers have discovered a number of other factors that determine the extent to which attitudes predict behaviour, such as the quality of the measures, the intensity with which the attitudes are held. Reviews of this evidence have consistently indicated that they *do* predict behaviour (Albarracin et al., 2001; Kraus, 1995).

This evidence is educational when it comes to the recently formed truism about gaps between values and action. Our problem is not that values and actions fail to correspond, it's that values often fail to predict *specific* behaviours very well. Air-travel may be one of the most environmentally damaging actions a person can do, yet we probably all know someone who takes such journeys frequently and still claims a concern for the environment. This is a different type of problem from the way that most people represent the so-called value-action gap. It's a problem that pertains more to how people mentally translate abstract values into very specific actions.

This is a problem I have been studying for over a decade, and the solution is complex. People are not always motivated and able to link their abstract values to particular actions. In addition, the values relevant to particular actions are often not salient to us when we act: when we see a beggar on the High Street, this is probably at a time when our consumerist concerns have been cued, making it more difficult to remember that we value helpfulness and that this value is relevant to whether or not we spare any change. In general, any value will compete with other values for our attention, making the application of any one value difficult.

The upshot of all this is that, in working to tackle environmental and social problems, we overlook the importance of values at our peril. It is true that we may be able to overlook values in designing interventions to address *specific* behaviours in piecemeal fashion. But a thorough-going response to these challenges will require a far more systematic and sustained engagement with the things that we hold to be most important: those things that we value.

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