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Citation

EOM, Kimin, "Does awareness of environmental problems guarantee environmental actions? Maybe more for those privileged" (2019). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3105.

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Does Awareness Of Environmental Problems Guarantee Environmental Actions? Maybe More For Those Privileged

By: Kimin Eom

Published in Science Trends, January 7, 2019

<https://sciencetrends.com/does-awareness-of-environmental-problems-guarantee-environmental-actions-maybe-more-for-those-privileged/>

Environmental problems such as climate change have been a major challenge facing humanity today. Most climate scientists are in consensus that human activities are the major cause of the occurring climate change. Thus, large efforts from activists and governmental and international organizations have been made to reduce human-generated greenhouse gas emissions and promote pro-environmental actions.

One of the commonly-used approaches is to provide information regarding the urgency of climate change so that people recognize the problem and further act to address it. Although this approach has been effective in persuading people of the seriousness of climate change, it has had only minimal effects in bringing behavioral change.

Why is this the case? Note that the information-based approach is built on a specific assumption about how and why people act. That is, once people are aware of problems, they would engage in actions to solve the problems. How well does it represent the ways in which the public's behavior operates? That information-based strategies have had only minimal effects on behavior implies that the answer is no; the awareness of environmental problems does not necessarily lead to pro-environmental action and support.

The assumption that problem awareness leads to action may be relevant only to certain circles in society; specifically, those who are more privileged in life. When people have resources (such as power and affluence), it is easier for them to act according to what they want, feel, and believe. In contrast, people without those resources need more frequently to adjust their actions according to external constraints. These underprivileged people are less likely to enjoy the same extent of freedom as those with greater resources, regarding directly expressing their personal attitudes and beliefs through actions. Consequently, people who have and people who do not have are likely to differ in terms of how closely their personal attitudes and beliefs lead to relevant actions.

Consistent with this idea, our recent research has found that personal beliefs about environmental issues are a better precursor of pro-environmental actions among those who have greater resources in life. In a series of studies, we collected responses from US citizens. We made comparisons between low vs. high socioeconomic status (SES) individuals in terms of how strongly their personal belief in climate change predicted their pro-environmental actions and policy support.

We consistently found that belief in climate change better predicted pro-environmental actions and policy support among higher, relative to lower, SES people (i.e., those with higher income and education levels). The reason was the difference in a sense of having control over life outcomes

between lower vs. higher SES people. We found that higher SES people showed a greater congruency between climate change beliefs and pro-environmental actions than lower SES people because they believe that they can influence life outcomes more strongly than lower SES people.

If personal attitudes and beliefs are not a major instigator of action among low SES individuals, what would be? We found that how prevalent one thinks pro-environmental behavior is among family and friends is more important among low SES people. This is consistent with other research on socioeconomic status showing lower SES individuals are more interdependent and sensitive to social norms. Socially fitting-in is more critical and adaptive to prosper in the resource-scarce and underprivileged life circumstances.

These findings suggest that there is a great deal of variability across people with different socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of how effective change in personal attitudes and beliefs is in generating pro-environmental actions and policy support. It may be more effective among those people who have greater resources and more control over their life outcomes. For those with fewer resources, however, targeting social factors such as changing perceived and actual social norms about environmental behavior may be more effective for behavioral change rather than targeting personal attitudes and beliefs.

More broadly, our findings suggest that there is significant variation across socio-cultural-economic groups in why people engage in green behaviors and what motivates them to engage in pro-environmental actions. Thus, designing strategies to promote citizens' pro-environmental engagement must be informed by an understanding of this diversity in the psychology of pro-environmental actions. Doing so is critical to come up with the more effective tools that push optimal psychological levers of behavioral change among diverse people whose support is necessary to combat climate change.

These findings are described in the article entitled Social class, control, and action: Socioeconomic status differences in antecedents of support for pro-environmental action, recently published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.009> This work was conducted by Kimin Eom from Singapore Management University and Heejung S. Kim and David K. Sherman from the University of California, Santa Barbara.