

Commitment and Behavior Change: A Meta-analysis and Critical Review of Commitment Making Strategies in Environmental Research

A. M. Lokhorst¹, C. Werner², H. Staats³, & E. van Dijk³

¹Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands

²University of Utah, Salt Lake City, United States

³Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Commitment making is commonly regarded as an effective way to promote pro-environmental behaviors (Dwyer et al., 1993). The general idea is that when people commit to a certain behavior, they adhere to their commitment and this produces long-term behavior change. While this idea seems promising, the results are mixed. In this study, we investigated if and why commitment is effective. To do so, we first present a meta-analysis of environmental studies containing a commitment manipulation. We asked whether commitment is effective in the short and in the long term. Also, we tested whether commitment effects can be enhanced by combining them with other treatments. In total, 19 studies were included in the analyses. We used all dependent measures that represented environmental behavior change (e.g., water or power use, recycling, transit use, etc.), using z-scores to average the values (Rosenthal, 1984). We did not include measures that might be considered mediators of the commitment to behavior relationship. While our analysis is based on a limited number of studies, we do find that commitment making overall is an effective instrument for altering environmental behaviors. Both commitment alone and commitment combined with other interventions appeared to be effective in altering environmental behavior, compared to control conditions. We then turn to an investigation of the psychological constructs that possibly underlie the commitment effect. We look at several possible mechanisms: self-concept and consistency (Cialdini,

2001), norms (Abrahamse, Steg, Vlek, & Rothengatter, 2005), and an attitudinal approach (Werner et al., 1995). These mechanisms are conceptually and theoretically distinct, but may complement each other in mediating effects of commitment on behavior. We conclude that while the making of commitments has been found to change behavior, a better understanding is needed of the possible underlying mechanisms that guide this commitment effect. We see commitment making as a potentially useful technique which could be improved by following up on findings from fundamental research. We provide suggestions for future research and recommendations for improving the effectiveness of commitment making techniques.

References

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