ENERGY CONSERVATION

Beliefs about others' beliefs*Nat. Hum. Behav.* doi.org/ct5k (2018)

Providing consumers with reports that compare their home energy use with that of similar, nearby households has been shown to promote energy-conservation behaviour. However, these descriptive social-norm interventions do not affect all individuals equally. Jon Jachimowicz from Columbia University and Oliver Hauser from the University of Exeter, together with colleagues from Columbia University, Duke University and Ideas42, examined whether second-order normative beliefs — what people believe about what others believe — could account for variability in intervention effectiveness.

The researchers matched data from 211 randomized controlled trials from 27 US states with survey data, and found that the provision of home energy reports led to greater reductions in home energy use in states where respondents believed that their community cares about saving energy. Personal beliefs about saving energy were not associated with the magnitude of the treatment effect. The causal influence of second-order normative beliefs was then tested in an experimental study. Participants who were told that most of their neighbours believe that saving energy is important indicated that they were more willing to decrease their own energy consumption, compared with participants told that few of their neighbours believe in the importance of saving energy, controlling for personal beliefs. This suggests that even if people care about reducing energy consumption, it's the belief that others care too that inspires action.

Jenn Richler

Published online: 9 October 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-018-0272-3>