

Pride tops guilt as a motivator for environmental decisions

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Elke U. Weber, a professor of psychology and public affairs at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, conducted the study—which appears in the academic journal *PLOS ONE*—along with Ph.D. candidate Claudia R. Schneider (who is visiting Princeton's Department of Psychology through the Ivy League Exchange Scholar Program) and colleagues at Columbia University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Past research has shown that anticipating how one will feel afterward plays a big role in decision-

making—particularly when making decisions that affect others. "In simple terms, people tend to avoid taking actions that could result in negative emotions, such as guilt and sadness, and to pursue those that will result in positive states, such as [pride](#) and joy," said Weber, who also is the Gerhard R. Andlinger Professor in Energy and the Environment.

Pro-environmental messaging sometimes emphasizes pride to spur people into action, Weber said, but it more often focuses on guilt. She and her colleagues wondered which is the better motivator in this area. To find out, they asked people from a sample of 987 diverse participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform to think about either the pride they would feel after taking pro-environmental actions or the guilt they would feel for not doing so, just before making a series of decisions related to the environment.

The participants were prompted to think about future pride or guilt by one of three methods. Some were given a one-sentence reminder—which remained at the top of their computer screens as they completed a survey—that their environmental choices might make them either proud or guilty. Others were given five environmentally friendly or unfriendly choice scenarios and asked to consider how making each choice might make them feel pride or guilt. Still others were asked to write a brief essay reflecting on their future feelings of pride or guilt over a real upcoming environmental decision. In the end, there were six groups: one for each of the three reflection methods and within each one section that considered future pride and another that reflected on future guilt.

Next, the participants were asked to make five sets of choices, each with "green" (environmentally friendly) or "brown" (environmentally unfriendly) options. In one scenario, for example, they could choose a sofa made from environmentally friendly fabric but available only in outdated styles, or they

could pick a more modern style of sofa made from fabric produced with harsh chemicals. In another scenario, they could pick any or all of 14 green amenities for an apartment (such as an Energy Star-rated refrigerator), with the caveat that each one added \$3 per month to the rent. A control group made the same decisions without being prompted to think about future pride or guilt.

The results revealed a clear pattern across all of the groups. "Overall," Weber said, "participants who were exposed to anticipation of pride consistently reported higher pro-environmental intentions than those exposed to anticipated guilt."

A likely explanation, she said—one that's backed up by a great deal of past research—is that some people react badly and get defensive when they're told they should feel guilty about something, making them less likely to follow a desired course of action. Thus, guilt-based environmental appeals run the risk of backfiring.

"Because most appeals for pro-environmental action rely on [guilt](#) to motivate their target audience, our findings suggest a rethinking of environmental and climate change messaging" to harness the power of positive emotions like pride, Weber said.

More information: "The Influence of Anticipated Pride and Guilt on Pro-Environmental Decision Making," *PLOS ONE* (2018).

Provided by Princeton University

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