

Author Response to: The Attitude–Action Gap: Toward a Better Understanding of “How Much is Enough?”

Tom Bowerman* and **Ezra M. Markowitz**

PolicyInteractive, University of Oregon, Eugene Oregon

In our target article (Markowitz & Bowerman 2011), we reported findings from a series of surveys suggesting that a large majority of Americans possess positive attitudes towards reducing consumption, with implications for individual and policy actions. Commentators Katherine Arbuthnott, Keith Brown, and Susan Clayton draw attention to both strengths and weaknesses in our target manuscript and raise important points about the role of consumption-related attitudes and norms in shaping behavior and policy. As readers following this prior discussion are aware, our initial research centered around a consistent finding regarding Oregonians’ attitudes towards consumption: across a series of state-wide surveys and in-depth interviews, we found that the vast majority of Oregonians agreed that “Our country would be better off if we all consumed less.” At the same time, we found decidedly mixed support regarding the translation of such “de-consumption” beliefs into actual behavior and policy preferences. All three of the commentators appear to share our own guarded optimism regarding the potential implications of these findings for confronting issues related to over-consumption (e.g., climate change). We are largely in agreement with the various points and critiques each raises and herein aim to offer an actionable response.

Responding to Commentaries by Arbuthnott, Clayton, and Brown on the article “How much is enough? Examining the public’s beliefs about consumption.” Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy by Markowitz & Bowerman (2011).

We originally reported (Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011) that a strong majority of Americans possess affirmative attitudes to consume less, with implications for individual and policy behaviors. Responding commentators Katherine Arbuthnott,

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tom Bowerman, Project Director, PolicyInteractive, 532 Olive Street, Eugene, Oregon 97401 [e-mail: tom@policyinteractive.org].

Keith Brown, and Susan Clayton individually drew attention to both strengths and weaknesses in our target manuscript and raised important points about the role of consumption-related attitudes and norms in shaping behavior and policy. As readers following this prior discussion are aware, our initial research centered around a consistent finding regarding Oregonians' attitudes toward consumption: across a series of state-wide surveys and in-depth interviews; we found that the vast majority of Oregonians agreed that "our country would be better off if we all consumed less." At the same time, we found decidedly mixed support regarding the translation of such "deconsumption" beliefs into actual behavior and policy preferences. All three of the commentators appear to share our own guarded optimism regarding the potential implications of these findings for confronting issues related to overconsumption (e.g., climate change). We are largely in agreement with the various points and critiques each raises and herein aim to offer actionable response.

Four primary themes emerged in their varied responses:

- The importance of "identity" in driving consumption patterns;
- The role of social norms in shaping consumer behavior;
- The possible use of psychologically-based interventions to change consumer behavior;
- The significance of the so-called "attitude-behavior gap" with respect to tempering the real-world impacts of observed deconsumption attitudes

Given each author's distinctive perspective, we have organized our response below by author rather than by theme. Before addressing each author, we note that the commentators all reference our findings as being Oregon specific. Indeed, the original data we presented in the target article were all drawn from Oregon-based surveys. However, we also drew attention to supporting evidence from national surveys by others, showing that Oregon is not entirely unique with respect to attitudes toward consumption. Both the research we cited as well as our own subsequent national survey research completed because publication of the article finds that beliefs about the benefits of deconsumption are shared by most Americans. This is important to note at the outset so as to encourage readers to evaluate the subsequent discussion as relevant to the broader American population rather than as perceiving Oregon as an outlier.

Clayton: Will People Act to Mitigate Climate Change (Clayton, 2012)

Combining her response to our article with her reaction to Liu and Sibley's (2011) examination of young adults' willingness to make sacrifices for environmental protection, Clayton highlights the important and multifaceted role that "identity" likely plays in shaping individuals' consumption patterns and

engagement with environmental issues. Drawing on research from numerous fields, including consumer and social psychologies, Clayton draws attention to the effects that identity-related constructs have in driving consumer decision-making and, perhaps, attitudes. For example, she discusses the powerful role that political ideology has come to play in the context of climate change, and in the process highlights a critical point from our article: whereas individuals' political identities play an outsized role in shaping perceptions of climate change, they do not (yet) appear to affect attitudes toward consumption. As Clayton suggests, we believe our findings point to connections between consumption beliefs and attitudes on the one hand and nonpolitical, personal identities on the other (e.g., being a frugal person). We agree wholeheartedly with Clayton when she suggests that our findings indicate that Oregonians (and perhaps Americans more generally) may link deconsumption preferences and ideals with parts of their personal identities that exist apart from the growing political polarization currently taking place in American culture (cf., Abramowitz, 2010).

Within this context, Clayton proceeds to briefly examine the role of national identity as a potential lever point for reducing consumption, drawing special attention to our finding of majority endorsement of the belief that the current economic downturn "may be just what we need to reorder our values." Moreover, she astutely emphasizes the importance of the specific words used in that particular item—the use of "we" and "our"—and she suggests that such terminology may have led our respondents to focus on their group-level identities as Americans. We agree with Clayton that such group-level identities may be particularly useful for understanding and perhaps shaping behavior and, of particular interest to us, policy preferences and support. On the other hand, this optimistic view collides headfirst with a prevailing economic policy agenda that continues to define economic growth and consumption as necessary and desirable. Experimental work examining the effects of activating various types of identities, including group-level ones, on subsequent consumption and policy support represents an important and intriguing direction for future research.

Arbuthnott: Sustainable Consumption: Attitudes, Actions, and Well-Being (Arbuthnott 2011)

"[G]iven the importance of descriptive and injunctive social norms in influencing behavior (e.g., Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), widely publicizing these findings would likely benefit sustainability objectives in a variety of ways. However, as Markowitz and Bowerman acknowledge, much more work will be needed to change endorsement of reduced consumption beliefs into intentions, and intentions into actions (Arbuthnott, 2009, 2010; Webb & Sheeran, 2006)" (p. 1–2).

Arbuthnott, along with Brown (see below) emphasizes the challenges involved in translating deconsumption attitudes and intentions into behavior and policy

support. First, she observes that “environmental concern” has become a social norm, likely leading at least some survey participants to report high levels of concern as a result of socially desirable responding and impression management motives. Thus, she suggests, “In interpreting these findings, we should keep in mind that these results primarily reflect anonymous self-report responses, which are likely to be skewed toward social norms” (p. 2). She also notes that although attitudes favoring changes in our collective level of consumption provide some occasion for optimism, our participants’ concurrent lack of support for specific actions and policy prescriptions reveals that we are collectively some distance from actualized behavior; thus, her confidence in our collective willingness to engage in widespread change in consumption habits and patterns is tempered (as we believe it should be).

Building on these initial and non-controversial points, Arbuthnott provides some important insights regarding two particular barriers that likely contribute to the so-called “attitude-behavior gap”: habits and social psychological needs. With respect to habitual behaviors (e.g., commuting, food shopping), Arbuthnott emphasizes the effort and time necessary to alter deeply rooted patterns of behavior, citing evidence that change comes hard fought, “one behavior at a time” (p. 2; c.f. Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). As a result, she suggests that nonspecific public campaigns to reduce generic consumption will have little impact on individuals’ behavior. Kollmuss and Agyeman’s (2002) literature review affirms that habits often pose a strong barrier to a close link between attitudes and behavior. Therefore, any such “deconsumption campaigns” that fail to recognize and attempt to actively override the habitual nature of contemporary consumption patterns are likely to be ineffective, particularly in creating long-term change.

Tying in nicely with Clayton’s comments regarding the role of identity in the consumption domain, Arbuthnott also observes that once basic physical needs are met, social psychological needs such as affiliation, identity maintenance and status seeking become key drivers of consumptive behavior (see also Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). Arbuthnott suggests that positive engagement of these types of needs (with respect to reducing consumption) may be less difficult to accomplish than directly changing habits because identity attachment is closely affiliated with intentional action. As one of her students put it, “It makes me happier to be known as the girl who always walks to school than the girl who drives a ____ car” (p. 3). This example underscores how behavior often precedes attitude rather than vice versa (Kaiser, Oerke, & Boeger, 2007; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Ouellette & Wood, 1998) and how the real or perceived social desirability of environmental action, and deconsumption behaviors specifically, may inform or be reinforced by direct actions. More broadly, Arbuthnott’s example highlights the potential impact of building a social norm around reduced consumption (as we suggest in our original article), as widespread acceptance of the importance of reducing consumption may facilitate broader behavioral shifts.

Finally, we concur with Arbutnott regarding the emergence of evidence within the field of positive psychology which shows that individual happiness is associated less with wealth and more with nonmaterialistic factors (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Schor, 2000). Thus, we are in wholehearted agreement when she suggests that “framing reduced consumption positively, with goals of happiness or satisfaction, rather than negatively (e.g., depriving oneself of material goods) is also likely to be beneficial (Kaplan, 2000)” (p. 3). It is in these contexts that we agree that broadly shared “consume-less” attitudes will not single-handedly deliver behavior change (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2000; Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006) but may provide a robust nudge (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) which may lead at least some people to reconsider old habits, reset intentions, and fulfill identity and status needs in less impactful ways.

Brown: Critical Reflections on a “Big Tent” Approach to Reducing Consumption (Brown, 2012)

Taking the most critical perspective of the three commentators, Brown centers his critique around the previously and oft-discussed disconnect between individuals’ stated attitudes and their real-world actions. In-line with Arbutnott’s concerns, he calls for a more cautionary interpretation of the survey results we present in the target article, suggesting that “the authors are not yet in a position to advocate for policies on the basis of respondents’ desire to ‘consume less’” (p. 1). To support this point, Brown points primarily to pioneering work done by LaPiere (1934) on the gap between business owners’ stated racial attitudes and their actual race-relevant behaviors; he also refers to some of his own much more recent and relevant ethnographic research on consumption and consumer engagement. Brown also suggests that a deeper analysis of the many and varied “justification strategies” individuals and groups rely on (including reliance on heuristics, dissonance reduction through attitude change, and collective denial) may provide greater insight regarding the relationship between attitudes and behavior in this domain; we don’t disagree. Moreover, we agree that more nuanced examinations of individuals’ aspirations, intentions, and behaviors in the context of consumption could yield actionable insights about barriers and lever points to increasing connectivity between attitudes and behavior.

In challenging our optimism regarding individuals’ deconsumption attitudes, Brown appears to make little distinction between individuals’ consumption-related policy preferences/prescriptions and their willingness to take personal (and nonpolitical) actions to reduce consumption. In contrast, we are inclined to consider policy preferences and personally relevant behavioral decisions as potentially quite distinct (following, e.g., distinctions made by political scientists regarding different types of political and consumer engagement, see Stern (2000); also

see Kollmuss & Agyeman (2002, p. 255), perhaps particularly so in the domain of consumption (where the effects of personal decisions are felt immediately and are reinforced many times a day). Indeed, differences between these two routes to reductions in (society level) consumption did in fact emerge in our data. For example, as discussed in the target article, numerous policy proposals drew above 60% support from respondents (e.g., taxes on luxury boats, planes, and motor homes; higher efficiency standards for buildings, personal transportation; inverted electricity rate structures); yet other proposals, particularly ones with direct and obvious personal costs (e.g., increasing gas taxes), were consistently met with skepticism by our participants (as has been shown in numerous settings at the national scale, for example, Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Smith, 2011). Yet despite these positive numbers, we agree with both Brown and Arbuthnott in remaining fairly skeptical regarding the translation of current support for certain deconsumption policies into actual policymaking: such majority support can quickly vanish in the face of a well-financed election-time attack which activates distrust of government mandates or engages in fear mongering about a perceived loss of freedom and the American dream (with its ideological interpretations).

In the end, however, and despite some of the findings that he cites (including his own), Brown in fact seems to largely agree with the core argument we make in the target article, namely, that although deconsumption attitudes and ideals may not translate directly into behavior they might serve an important role in bridging partisan divides and creating new social norms around consumption; that is, widespread beliefs about the importance of reducing consumption may indeed serve as one foundation of a “big tent” approach to reducing our impacts on the environment (not to mention our own mental and physical well-being). It is along these lines, we believe, that our findings provide some hope regarding our collective ability to reduce consumption.

Discussion

The underlying message we take away from the three commentaries is one of cautionary encouragement and agreement with a concomitant call for further developmental research. We fully concur with all three commentators that research on consumption-related attitudes, behavior, and policy can be strengthened by doing the following: integrating attitude findings with improved measures of consumption behavior; moving research ever closer to real-world behavioral observation; observing the intersections of consumption attitude, intention and behavior; examination of motivations rooted in latent social norms; and, prospecting dissonance for insights about barriers to moderated consumption behavior.

In fact, our current work is developing along these lines. Perhaps the most central of these moving forward is the importance of recognizing and engaging with

the gap between individuals' self-reported attitudes on the one hand and their actions (consumer, political, or otherwise) on the other. As Brown and the other commentators suggest, there is clearly a need to further examine the "attitude-behavior gap" in the context of consumption attitudes and behaviors, particularly if our aim is to develop a more useful and applicable model of consumption-related decision making. Following Brown's suggestion of a multimethod approach, our current work involves integrating statistically representative surveying, sector based focus groups, targeted qualitative individual interviewing and applied behavioral observations. These methods aim specifically to add breadth or detail to our previous consumption-related attitude questions, allowing us to examine how competing beliefs and motives (e.g., beliefs about the importance of "keeping up with the Joneses" or convenience consumption) can shape individuals' ability and willingness to act in accordance with their deconsumption attitudes (Ajzen, 2001, Fazio & Zanna, 1981; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002). A second important step that we have begun to make in this subsequent work is the introduction, in our survey work, of measures of actual behavior (and particularly ones that are less subjective or susceptible to socially desirable reporting) alongside measures of attitudes, policy preferences, and behavioral intentions. Building off of our ability to more effectively measure actual consumption habits and impacts, we are now more explicitly examining the cognitive dissonance that likely emerges among individuals who both agree that we all should consume less and who themselves lead high-consumption lifestyles. For example, we are interviewing two different types of "committed environmentalists" who in theory might exhibit the largest distinction between harmony and dissonance: those who lead (voluntarily) "low" carbon emissions lives and those who are relatively high in their personal carbon emissions, based on self-reported but objective consumption criteria (Schaeffler & Presser, 2003).

The primary objective with this line of inquiry is to uncover novel insights regarding motives, barriers, and rewards related to consumption-oriented decision making among people who already hold positive attitudes, as well as to further explore the points of intersection among constructs such as behavioral intentions, action, and subjective well-being (see Chawla, 1998).

A final area of current exploration follows Arbuthnott's view of positive psychology. Emerging from four exploratory national platform pilot surveys conducted in collaboration with the Happiness and Well-being Lab at San Francisco State University, we have used versions of our consumption behavior measure alongside a number of validated measures of well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, materialism, personality traits, and associated measures of attitudes and beliefs. This set of pilots has evolved into a topic of policy actionability using a yet-to-be-refined "quality of place" survey instrument that aims to decipher what qualities of social and physical place-making policymakers or practitioners may be able to use in order to lower consumption.

Conclusion

We hold no illusion that strong “consume-less” attitudes necessarily and predictably yield decision making and policy preferences that aim for reduced consumption levels. As all three commentators point out, individual and collective consumption levels are shaped by a complex of interacting and oftentimes conflicting factors, of which attitudes toward consumption are just one piece. Nonetheless, the observed strong level of attitudinal agreement toward the benefits of reduced consumption suggests fertile ground for future research and, perhaps, intervention work that aims to maintain or even improve individuals’ and communities’ well-being while reducing consumption below present levels. The issues of long term equitability of resource allocations, care of the planet and avoidance of human-caused catastrophic impacts from climate change suggests deeper examination of consumption attitude strength, intention, and behavior is worth the effort. Within the current social politic of divisiveness and polarization, broad cultural agreement toward consuming less (74–88%) demonstrated from multimethod, time series, and statistical sampling suggests a worthy leverage point for meaningful engagement (Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011).

References

- Abramowitz, A. I. (2010). *The Disappearing Center*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ajzen, I. (2001). Nature and operation of attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*, 27–58.
- Arbuthnott, K. D. (2009). Education for sustainable development beyond attitude change. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, *10*, 152–163.
- Arbuthnott, K. D. (2010). Taking the long view: Environmental sustainability and delay of gratification. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *10*, 4–22.
- Arbuthnott, K. D. (2011). Sustainable consumption: Attitudes, actions, and well-being commentary on the article by Markowitz & Bowerman. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1530-2415.2011.01258.x
- Brown, K. (2012). Critical Reflections on a “Big Tent” approach to reducing consumption commentary on the article by Markowitz & Bowerman (2011). *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1530-2415.2012.01280.x
- Brown, K., & Kasser, T. (2005). Are psychological and ecological well-being compatible? The role of values, mindfulness, and lifestyle. *Social Indicators Research*, *74*(2), 349–368.
- Cialdini, R. B., Reno, R. R., & Kallgren, C. A. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *58*, 1015–1026.
- Chawla, L. (1998). Life paths into effective environmental action. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *31*(1), 15–26. DOI:10.1080/00958969909598628
- Clark, A. E., Frijters, & Shields, M. (2008). Relative income, happiness, and utility: An explanation for the Easterlin paradox and other puzzles. *Journal of Economic Literature*, *46*(1), 95–144.
- Clayton, S. (2012). Will people act to mitigate climate change? A comment on Markowitz & Bowerman, and Liu & Sibley. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1530-2415.2012.01284.x
- Fazio, R., & Zanna, M. (1981). Direct experience and attitude behavior consistency. *Advances In Experimental Psychology*, Vol. 14, 162–186. New York: Academic Press.

- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J., & Van den Bergh, B. (2010) Going green to be seen: Status, reputation, and conspicuous conservation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(3), 392–404.
- Kaiser, F. G., Oerke, B., & Boeger, F. (2007). Behavior-based environmental attitude: Development of an instrument for adolescents. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 27, 242–251.
- Kaplan, S. (2000). Human nature and environmentally responsible behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56, 491–508.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. (1993). The dark side of the American dream: Correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 410–422.
- Kollmus, A., & Agyeman, J. (2002). Mind the Gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior? *Environmental Education Research*, 8(3), 239–260.
- LaPiere, R. (1934). Attitudes vs. actions. *Social Forces*, 13(2), 230–237.
- Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Roser-Renouf, C., & Smith, N. (2011). *Climate change in the American mind: Public support for climate and energy policies in May 2011*. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.
- Liu, J., & Sibley, C. (2011). Hope for the future? Understanding self-sacrifice among young citizens of the world in the face of global warming. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1530-2415.2011.01275.x
- Markowitz, E., & Bowerman, T. (2011). How much is enough: Examining the public's belief about consumption. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1530-2415.2011.01230.x
- Ouellette, J. A., & Wood, W (1998). Habit and intention in everyday life: the multiple processes by which past behavior predicts future behavior. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(1), 54–74.
- Schaeffler, N., & Presser, S. (2003). The science of asking questions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 65–88
- Schor, J. (ed.) (2000). *Do Americans Shop Too Much?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Stern, P. (2000). New environmental theories, toward a coherent theory of environmentally significant behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56, 407–424.
- Thaler, R. & Sunstein, C. (2008) *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*; New York: Penguin.
- Visser, P., Bizer, G., & Krosnick, J. (2006). Exploring the latent structure of strength-related attitude attributes. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38 1–67.
- Webb, T. L., & Sheeran, P. (2006). Does changing behavioral intentions engender behavior change? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, 249–268.

TOM BOWERMAN has a degree in architecture from the University of Oregon and currently directs PolicyInteractive, a research organization. He practiced in the field of architecture, urban design, and planning for two decades, then turned to examine, through opinion research, the perceived disconnect between the physical sciences and the social responsiveness toward anthropogenic climate change. PolicyInteractive is a project of the Institute of Sustainability Education and Ecology in Eugene, Oregon.

EZRA M. MARKOWITZ is a doctoral student in the Environmental Sciences, Studies and Policy program at the University of Oregon, with a focus in psychology. He is also a staff member at PolicyInteractive. His research interests include the role of moral and social psychological processes in shaping individuals' responses to climate change, and the study of the intersection of environmental conservation, psychology, and public policy. His research is funded in part by a National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship.