

The more connected we feel to others, the more socially responsible we are: study

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A crucial factor in someone's decision to act in a socially responsible manner is the extent to which they believe that their actions make a difference.

In her recent paper, "Yes, I can: Feeling connected to others increases perceived effectiveness and socially responsible behavior" in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Natalia Karelaia, an Associate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD, finds that whether a person feels they make an impact or not depends on how socially connected they are.

"Our paper offers new insight into how feeling connected to others affects behavior. We find that identification with a social group has an empowering effect on individuals. People who are highly socially motivated may surrender some aspects of their individuality, but receive in return a [sense](#) of strength in numbers that gets absorbed into their own self-image. Consequently, they have a greater belief in the effectiveness of their individual actions, and a clearer conception of how their own choices directly impact the collective", said Karelaia.

Her paper studied the consumer habits of more than 600 adults in the US in a survey which sought to understand their social values, sense of connectedness to others and how effective they perceived their actions to be.

Those respondents who felt a high degree of [social connectedness](#) felt their individual actions had a greater impact on a larger scale. They were

also found to be the most socially conscious consumers, which was reflected in their responses to questions about how often they recycled and whether they were environmentally conscious in their purchasing behavior, such as avoiding products that cause environmental damage or those tested on animals.

The respondents' social values, which were measured by their responses to questions of whether particular behaviors were morally appropriate, however, turned out to be a less important predictor of their behavior than whether they felt they could make a difference. While values were important, the belief in one's ability to make an impact was necessary to influence behavior.

Karelaia took these insights into further studies to see whether people's decision-making could be influenced on the basis of social connectedness. In a second study, to bring about one's sense of connectedness to others, she recruited 39 undergraduate students and asked one group of them to bring to mind and describe a situation when they were buying a gift for someone. The other group was asked to write about buying something for themselves. Further reinforcing the initial findings, Karelaia found that people in the first group felt more socially connected and were more likely to believe in their actions having an ability to make a difference.

In a third study, 132 US-based adults completed the same writing task as in the second study. Afterwards, in a seemingly unrelated task, participants were asked to provide assistance to a non-governmental organization (NGO). They were told that the researchers conducting the study supported the actions of "EarthAction", an NGO, and it needed help finding corporate sponsors. To get that help it needed to develop corporate slogans. Participants were asked for their voluntary help in creating between 1 and 5 slogans. Those in the condition that made their connectedness to others more salient, developed more slogans each than

those in the control condition.

Karelaia also put money into the equation. 48 [undergraduate students](#) went through the same connectedness manipulation as in study 2 and 3 and were then invited to make a financial contribution to an NGO. The same pattern emerged.

In summary, the sense of one's connectedness was found to enhance the perceived effectiveness of one's actions, which in turn raised the participants' appreciation for the consequences of their behavior. This is especially important for organizations trying to promote ethical behavior. Karelaia's findings suggest that managers should build a sense of communal awareness, framing the [actions](#) of individuals and the firm in the context of the wider community.

"Overall, this suggests that we're at our ethical best when we feel part of a human community that transcends our immediate surroundings", said Karelaia.

More information: Irina Cojuharenco et al, Yes, I can: Feeling connected to others increases perceived effectiveness and socially responsible behavior, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2016.09.002](#)

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