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THE RESEARCHER ROLE IN THE ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOUR GAP

INTRODUCTION

In the green consumer behaviour literature the attitude-behaviour gap is well-established (Peattie, 2010). Studies show that although people condone environmentally friendly actions, their green attitudes do not necessarily translate into green behaviours. Even when green behaviours are reported, this is not borne out by sales figures or recycling rates. The attitude-behaviour gap has been debated across disciplines researching different aspects of green consumer behaviour, such as recycling (Perrin & Barton, 2001), purchasing green energy (Salmela & Varho, 2006), or household goods (Peattie, 2010). Researchers have debated how attitudes and behaviours may be related or unrelated (Ungar, 1994).

Within the field of sustainable tourism (Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010) researchers have used these ideas to investigate tourist attitudes and behaviours with respect to flying (Hares, Dickinson & Wilkes, 2010; Cohen, Higham & Cavaliere, 2011; McKercher & Prideaux, 2011; Kroesen, 2013). Our research falls within this tradition.

Data from two studies of the flying behaviour of green consumers have raised the question of whether researchers are erroneously equating attitudes with behaviour because of how questions are presented and data are interpreted. We contend that this may be contributing to the attitude-behaviour gap.

Two protocols

We illustrate this with reference to two qualitative studies of flying behaviour with two different groups of UK consumers which used different, semi-structured interview protocols. The interviewees were recruited by a) asking green consumers to come forward and be interviewed about their travel behaviour through adverts in green shops or networks; and b) snowballing from that initial sample. Thus our samples comprised self-identified green consumers.

The first protocol (*recent travel purchases*) asked 18 consumers about their most recent large travel purchase. We discussed the decision-making process in detail (who was involved, amount of research undertaken, timing, use of information sources, other travel options), and then went on to ask about their weekly shopping habits, applying a similar technique to elicit narratives about shopping for food.

In the second protocol (*green concerns*) we began by asking the 11 consumers in the second group to outline the environmental issues which most concerned them. No matter which issues were raised initially, we then asked about their views on flying: whether they flew; how they felt about the decisions they had made; and how that might change. Both protocols gave respondents the opportunity to discuss attitudes and behaviours.

Although the classification data collected (age, gender, number of adults and children in the household, education level, occupation, household income) showed no discernible difference between the two groups, the kind of data surfaced about flying was markedly different: not in terms of the behaviours that were described (most interviewees still flew), but in terms of the way in which that behaviour, and their feelings about it, was described.

The *recent travel purchases* group painted very different pictures of their travel behaviours and their everyday shopping. Their travel purchases were related in a matter of fact way, often without recourse to green criteria and it was not until the discussion of their weekly food shopping that their green consumption became evident. Quotations which provide the richest insights have been selected.

On flying: *"… we go back to New Zealand every second winter and this time we decided to break the journey up and go by Asia on the way so we flew into Bangkok and did a round trip to Cambodia, down the coast and back to Bangkok. Then we flew out to New Zealand then we bought a car and drove around and then came back through Singapore."*

On food shopping: *"I have a [local, organic vegetable] box scheme and I obviously do some shopping at [wholefood coop] and sometimes I shop at [supermarket] but as little as I can get away with."*

For the *green concerns* group, on the other hand, the discussions of purchasing flights were full of expressions of guilt and regret around the fact that, despite their environmental beliefs, and efforts in other areas, they still chose to fly.

"I do worry about all of the cheap budget flights and the fact that people just fly here there and everywhere these days, and I suppose it shocks me, although I am incredibly hypocritical, because last year [husband] and I flew to [UK city], which is shocking!"

Both groups described behaviour (flying) that was out of line with their strongly held environmental beliefs, but only the second group judged their behaviour as problematic or hypocritical.

Data Elicitation

Initially we centred on data elicitation issues such as question order and question wording to explain the differences in the datasets. The idea that the wording of questions and the question order will inherently bias the answers is well accepted in the qualitative tradition. The data from the second protocol could be explained by the fact that the question order increased the salience of the interviewee's green 'stance' immediately prior to talking about flights, thus framing the purchase in these terms. However we came to realise that one of the key differences lay in the kind of 'flight' being discussed. The *recent travel purchases* group described purchase processes for specific travel purchases in the recent past. However, although when the *green*

concerns group were asked about their opinions of flying they sometimes used specific purchases to illustrate their answers, they often talked about flying in a more generalised, collective and sometimes idealised way. In other words, they were often not speaking about specific, actual flights, but flights in general, or hypothetical flights. Sometimes they even spoke about what 'people' do, or should do, without including themselves.

Data Interpretation

The attitude-behaviour gap means that asking about attitudes or intentions to act in a green manner does not necessarily tell us very much about behaviour. Equally, noting environmental behaviours does not necessarily tell us about environmental attitudes as one person may take a bus between two cities because they are committed to reducing their carbon footprint, but another may take an identical journey because it was cheap. Building on these points, our research evaluation has surfaced two further issues:

1. Accessing attitudes and behaviours may need different research designs. The *recent purchases* protocol enabled collection of data on behaviours but did not capture respondents' attitudes or reflections on how or why their behaviours were out of line with their attitudes. The *green concerns* protocol, by contrast, was excellent at accessing attitudes, but encouraged discussion of the ideal or hypothetical, and was thus less effective at capturing behaviours.

2. Researchers need to reflect on whether they are collecting data on attitudes or behaviours. If we do not ask about specific, recent purchases then we are inviting people to tell us, not about their behaviours, but about their attitudes and intentions. There is no harm in collecting such data, but the problem comes when we ask about behaviour in such a way as to elicit data about attitudes or intentions and then treat that data as if it is telling us something about behaviour.

In other words, the issues of question order and wording in the elicitation stage are compounded in the interpretation stage if researchers do not reflect critically on whether they are a) eliciting data on attitudes or behaviours and b) representing data on attitudes as behaviours or vice versa. This is true for researchers whatever stance they take in the wider debate about the relationship between attitudes and behaviours.

We therefore suggest that the ways in which we research green consumers might be partially responsible for the attitude-behaviour gap. As well as acknowledging that green consumers might exaggerate (Perrin & Barton, 2001) or feel pressure to offer socially acceptable answers (Cohen, Higham & Cavaliere, 2011), researchers need to examine whether their research designs are part of the problem. This caution applies not only to tourism researchers, but across the social sciences.

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