

From the abstract to the concrete and back: The role of mind-sets in science communication and goal-achievement

I will present two lines of my work that are both interested in how thinking either concretely or abstractly affects people's perceptions and behaviour.

The first line of my work focuses on the question of how to communicate information about abstract phenomena such as climate change in a way that is easy for non-experts to engage with. I will present a series of experiments that explored the frequently suggested strategy to increase individuals' engagement with climate change by highlighting its (spatially) proximal consequences. Although participants who received information about proximal climate change (i.e., relatively concrete information) rated local and personal risks from climate change as more likely than participants who received information about more distant impacts (i.e., more abstract information), no differences were observed in terms of the two experimental groups' motivation to mitigate climate change or to adapt to its consequences. I will discuss possible explanations as to why making climate change more concrete by zooming in on proximal impacts did not increase individuals' motivation to respond to this threat and conclude that the effects of "proximising" are much more complex than is commonly assumed.

The second area of research deals with the question of how concrete and abstract goals affect goal achievement. Similarly to the belief that scientific evidence is best communicated in a concrete manner, there are compelling theoretical and empirical reasons suggesting that concrete goals are more instrumental in achieving goals than abstract goals. A crucial advantage of concrete goals is that they have clear start and endpoints. This strengthens people's belief that they are capable to carry out the steps required to achieve the intended goal and facilitates action initiation. However, I will argue that from a longer-term perspective clear end points can be problematic because once reached they signal people that they have done what is necessary and that they can stop pursuing that particular goal. Because abstract goals do not have a clear end-state and are therefore difficult to fully achieve, setting abstract goals could be a solution to prevent people from feeling that they have done "enough" and to maintain their motivation to work towards what they want to achieve. I will present initial findings from the health context that support this reasoning and discuss possible applications in the context of water conservation.