

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND INFORMATION-PROCESSING PREDICTORS OF PUBLIC WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR FLOOD CONTROL AND ECOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS IN URBAN RIVER WATERSHEDS

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This study explores some of the social and psychological factors which affect public willingness to pay (WTP) for flood control and ecological enhancement projects in urban river watersheds. Specifically, a telephone sample survey of nearly one thousand adult residents of two such watersheds in the Milwaukee area examined (1) predictors of WTP based primarily on Ajzen's "Theory of Planned Behavior" (TPB) and (2) the ways in which residents' use of communication channels and information relates to their WTP judgments as traced through TPB variables. Eagly & Chaiken's "Heuristic-Systematic" model of information processing, as adapted by the Model of Risk Information Seeking and Processing (Griffin, Dunwoody, & Neuwirth), informs the analysis of communication as related to TPB. Specifically, with controls for perceived social pressures to support the projects ("subjective norms"), perceived ability to afford the project ("perceived behavioral control"), and other factors such as income, results indicate that residents' "cognitive structure" about the projects relates relatively strongly to their willingness to pay (an adaptation of Ajzen's "behavioral intention" concept), more strongly than income. In this case, cognitive structure is comprised of (1) a set of "behavioral beliefs" individuals hold about the likely outcomes, for themselves, for others, and for the ecosystem, of paying a given amount to support the project, (2) a set of evaluations they use to judge the goodness of each outcome, and (3) an additional judgment of how important each outcome is to their decision about supporting the project monetarily (the latter an addition to the standard Ajzen formulation). Beliefs posed to survey respondents in the interviews were first derived in large measure through a series of focus groups held in the two watersheds. These results are consistent with predictions from TPB. In addition, based on TPB, the Eagly & Chaiken model, and the Griffin et al. model, the study examined the relationship of respondents' information processing to the number of beliefs they each weighed and considered in assessing their WTP for the projects. This relationship is important since, together, these models would predict that individuals who devote more cognitive effort to analyzing information they gather and hold about the projects ("systematic processing") will (1) take more beliefs into account in deciding WTP and (2) thereby develop cognitions, attitudes, and, by extension, behavioral intentions to pay that are more stable over time (i.e., resistant to change). Analysis indicates that individuals who routinely employ systematic processing of information they encountered about these topics in the mass media and other channels did consider a variety of relevant behavioral beliefs more strongly than those whose approach to the information was more superficial. Predictors of such information seeking and processing habits are also explored. This outcome is important since planners must rely on WTP estimates gathered from public surveys as being stable over reasonable periods of time. A follow-up, panel-design survey is designed to assess such stability. (*This research is supported by a STAR grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Science Foundation, and U.S. Department of Agriculture.*)