



The norms associated with climate change: Understanding social norms through acts of interpersonal activism



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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research points to the role social norms may play in both maintaining carbon intensive lifestyles and soliciting changes towards more sustainable ways of living. However, despite highlighting the importance of pro-environmental social norms, such literature has said far less about the processes by which such norms might develop. We present a new approach to conceptualising social norms that focuses on understanding their dynamics within social interaction, by positioning interpersonal confrontation as a potential mechanism of change. We examine the normative dynamics of environmentalism by comparing the costs of interpersonally confronting climate change disregard with those associated with confronting racism. In two experimental studies, we presented participants with scenarios describing a person confronting (versus not confronting) contentious comments in each domain. We identified social costs to interpersonal confrontation of climate change disregard but not racism, as indicated by reduced ratings of perceived warmth of and closeness to the confronter (Study 1), and this effect was mediated by the perceived morality of the issue in question (Study 2). Our findings highlight how wider social constructions of (im)morality around climate change impact upon social interactions in ways that have important implications for processes of social (and ultimately environmental) change.

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1. Introduction

Despite widespread belief in human-caused climate change and high levels of concern about its impacts in many Western nations (Capstick et al., 2015; Leiserowitz et al., 2013; Park et al., 2012), the majority of people in such nations continue to live carbon intensive lifestyles. World leaders have recently agreed that global temperature rise must be kept below 2° C to avoid most severe consequences of a changing climate (United Nations, 2015). Achieving this ambitious target will require every nation drastically reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in coming decades. Low carbon economies, cities and households need to become ‘the norm’, and must do so in a short space of time. It thus becomes essential to understand the social dynamics that might

encourage or inhibit social change towards widespread adoption of sustainable lifestyles. We present here a novel approach to examining social norms that focuses on what is arguably the very essence of the most powerful forms of normative processes: expressed social disapproval of particular actions. We argue that an absence of expressions of social disapproval (confrontation) regarding carbon intensive lifestyles is symptomatic of the lack of moral status currently attributed to the issue. Furthermore, a collective unwillingness to engage in such acts of interpersonal activism may be an inhibitor of widespread social change towards less carbon intensive ways of living. Despite having received ample attention in the context of discrimination (e.g. ‘saying no to’ racism/sexism), such acts have received relatively little attention in the environmental domain.

1.1. Climate change engagement and social normative processes

The climate change policy literature is replete with calls for engaging the public more in the policy making process (Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Pidgeon, 2012; Whitmarsh et al., 2013). Pidgeon (2012)

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recently suggested that policy makers should improve their efforts to consider the norms and beliefs of the public when designing and communicating climate change interventions. Similarly, [Whitmarsh et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that current efforts to engage the public require innovative changes adopting more bottom-up approaches that are arguably more effective and currently underrepresented relative to top-down governmental campaigns. [Stoknes \(2014\)](#) also suggests that policy makers should try to harness the power of social norms and their effects on environmental decisions via the “use of social networks” (p. 6). However, [Markowitz and Shariff \(2012\)](#) also draw attention to the possible *negative* impact of social norms. People can be influenced by both norms encouraging environmental action and norms that might conflict with sustainable lifestyles, such as the expectation of car ownership.

Social norms can therefore clearly act as both a barrier to as well as the basis of interventions to promote pro-environmental behaviour. Indeed [Gifford \(2011\)](#) simultaneously lists comparisons with others as one of the “seven dragons of inaction” (p. 290) while also arguing that social norms are a crucial factor in promoting many proenvironmental decisions. While exposure to different social norms can both promote and undermine engagement with climate change, Gifford points out that a carbon intensive lifestyle is *currently* the dominant norm (in the West) and therefore social norms probably currently hinder environmental actions more than they promote them. Some support for such a position can be gleaned from qualitative studies in which participants’ justifications of their own carbon intensive lifestyles turn on references to conforming to expectations of the social environment (see [Kurz et al., 2005](#); [Lorenzoni et al., 2007](#)). As a result, if norm research is going to be useful in this domain, it needs to have processes of change front and centre.

1.2. The psychology of social norms

A vast body of psychological literature has highlighted the consequences of social norms for individual action. Information about what others think one should do (injunctive norms) and what they actually do (descriptive norms) has been shown to crucially influence individuals’ decisions to think and/or behave in particular ways, not least in the domain of energy consumption ([Goldstein et al., 2008](#); [Schultz et al., 2007](#)). Moreover, perceived discrepancies between injunctive and descriptive norms has been shown to undermine behaviour change ([Smith and Louis, 2009](#)). Such findings help explain the commonly observed self-perpetuating cycle of people not adopting pro-environmental actions because nobody else is perceived to be making such changes, despite clear injunctive norms that suggest people ‘should’. Despite maintained efforts to promote environmental actions, motivated by serious environmental problems such as climate change, current evidence shows that pro-environmental behavioural interventions struggle to generate widespread change ([Reckien et al., 2014](#)).

The current state of the art regarding social norms within psychology provides a compelling account of the maintenance of the environmentally unsustainable status quo. However, the issue of how social norms actually *change* remains under-examined. In recent interdisciplinary philosophical work, [Bicchieri and Mercier \(2014\)](#) attempt to shed light on the pathways that might lead to a change in social norms. These theoretical pathways range from top-down policy measures, organised opportunities for deliberation (e.g. community meetings) and naturally occurring sanctions by individuals who want to change the status quo. What all these strategies have in common is that the change in social norms can only be realised and maintained if the normative expectations of others’ behaviour is supported by the behavioural display of the newly normative action and (most importantly) visible sanctions

of violations of this new norm. Thus, we are still left with a need to understand the dynamics that govern the processes by which norms cross over normative tipping points.

Social norms are traditionally measured and theorised in rather static ways, for example by explicitly assessing the social acceptability of particular attitudes or actions ([Bamberg et al., 2007](#); [Cialdini et al., 1990](#)). Despite often being measured and conceptualised in this way, social norms are more than perceptions. They are actually what is actively approved or disapproved of within the social environment ([Elster, 1989](#)), a recognition of which brings into focus the intrinsically interactional nature of social norms.

1.3. Interpersonal confrontation as a normative process

If social norms and their violation are thought of as something that becomes operationalized within social interaction then one must consider the ways in which they are interpersonally policed. Such an approach has some antecedents within the domain of discrimination (e.g. sexism, racism). [Blanchard et al. \(1991\)](#) proposed what they later ([Blanchard et al., 1994](#)) designated as “the social context approach”. This advocates the idea that the lack of social regulation of everyday racist incidents encourages the perpetuation of racism, predicated on the notion that social regulations greatly affect people’s attitudes. Thus, social displays of one’s opinion can increase related opinion in others (e.g. egalitarianism) and the failure to publically express one’s opinion can give room for undesired opinions or actions (e.g. racism). Similar to literature on normative messages, this approach highlights the strong effect of normative influence on personal attitudes and actions. However, what is crucially important about the social context approach is that it accentuates the interpersonal nature of social norms, arguing that everyday interactions create opportunities to encourage or discourage specific actions. The literature on confrontation of prejudice highlights the effects and costs of interpersonally confronting another person and the role it plays in enforcing norms. It has shown that the desire for change and the belief in change act as strong motivators for people to confront others ([Kaiser and Miller, 2004](#); [Rattan and Dweck, 2010](#); [Swim and Hyers, 1999](#)), and that being confronted can act as a reminder to align actions with prevalent social norms ([Czopp et al., 2006](#)). Furthermore, studies have also shown that reactions to confrontation reflect the extent to which the behaviour that is being confronted is rooted in strong social norms ([Czopp and Monteith, 2003](#)). These findings highlight that while confrontation is a process that might change actions or individual attitudes, the reactions towards and perceptions of a confrontation might also reflect the prevailing norms related to the confronted position.

Taken together, the accumulated findings on interpersonal confrontation in the domain of discrimination suggests that strong interpersonal reactions to norm-violating incidents (e.g. racism) are necessary for norms to be enforced within the social environment. Furthermore, the question arises whether expressing dissatisfaction about an incident might not only be important for enforcing (already widely accepted) social norms (e.g. in the context of racism), but might also play a role in changing social norms (e.g. in the context of climate change). Researchers have recently begun to examine confrontation in the context of (non) environmental actions, delivering initial evidence that receiving negative reactions towards non-environmental behaviour may result in individuals changing their future behaviours to be more sustainable. [Swim and Bloodhart \(2013\)](#) showed that direct social disapproval for energy-consuming behaviour (i.e., taking the elevator versus the stairs) not only influenced subsequent choices in the same domain but also spilled over to increase other

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