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# Institutionalized collective action and the relationship between beliefs about environmental problems and environmental actions: A cross-national analysis

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## ABSTRACT

How do institutions affect the relationship between an individual's beliefs and their actions? Institutionalized strategies are routine ways of addressing problems that become taken-for-granted in a society. Environmental problems constitute a collective action problem in that personal consumption often conflicts with collective interests. I test whether beliefs about environmental problems have a different impact on a person's pro-environmental behaviors, depending on how addressing collective action problems is institutionalized in their society. In particular, I use level of welfare targeting as an observable, organizational difference among societies that reflects different institutionalized strategies for addressing a prominent collective action problem. I use multilevel models on data from the 2010 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and measures of welfare targeting from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to answer this question. I find that in societies where the institutionalized strategy for dealing with inequality is highly targeted, individuals' beliefs that these problems are important, real, and whether they can do something about them have a greater impact on their actions. The results suggest individuals generalize taken-for-granted strategies of assuring collective welfare to implement their individual beliefs about the environment, making institutional environments important moderators of the strength of the belief-action relationship.

## 1. Introduction

How do institutions affect the relationship between an individual's beliefs and their actions? Institutions are the strategies for addressing problems that are routine and taken-for-granted as the way to order activity in a society (Berger and Luckman, 1966; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Mohr, 2000; Scott, 1991). Institutions influence actions by signaling to actors which strategies are preferable, or possible, when faced with challenges. Embeddedness in an institutional environment creates a disposition in individuals to perceive prominent strategies as the natural one to employ when faced with a range of similar problems (Douglas, 1986; Grief, 2006; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In this paper, I examine whether an individual's beliefs about environmental problems have a different effect on their behaviors in different institutional environments. Many environmental problems are collective action problems since individuals are called upon to adjust their own behaviors for a collective interest. Therefore, I model the impact individuals' beliefs about environmental problems have on their pro-environmental behaviors, taking into account how addressing such collective action problems has been institutionalized in their society (Olson, 1971; Running, 2013; Schelling, 1978).

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Drawing on institutional theory, I argue that a society's long-standing arrangements for the maintenance of public welfare provide insight into its institutionalized strategies for collective action. Provision of the public welfare is a problem common to all societies. Further, the system for addressing the public welfare is one of the most prominent organizations in any society, impacting practically all individuals in a society in some way. Yet, there are important organizational differences between countries in how the inherent risks and benefits of welfare provision are allocated. (Brooks and Manza, 2007; Esping-Anderson, 1990; Pierson, 2004). These arrangements reveal differences in how addressing problems of collective welfare have been institutionalized. A broad, important organizational difference is whether welfare is achieved through strategies that pool risks and benefits collectively, or that transfer them from one individual to another (Korpi and Palme, 1998). I argue that this institutional difference moderates the effect of beliefs on behaviors. Specifically, I propose that the effect of an individual's beliefs about environmental problems—whether they are real, whether they are important, and whether a person believes they can do about anything about them—on their behaviors should be moderated by how their society has institutionalized addressing collective action problems. Therefore, I focus on how an individual's beliefs and their society's institutions interact to predict their pro-environmental behaviors.

The scientific community is largely in agreement that the activities of individuals aggregate to become an important driver of many environmental problems (for an overview see Brulle and Dunlap, 2015). Scholars have isolated a range of characteristics and beliefs that are predictive of pro-environmental behaviors. However, there is mixed evidence for the degree to which an individual's beliefs, values, and characteristics predict their behaviors in different societies, with some scholars finding an impact of social context on this relationship, while others find this relationship is consistent across societies (Fairbrother, 2016; Hadler and Haller, 2011; Haller and Hadler, 2008; Marquart-Pyatt, 2008, 2012, 2013; Miles, 2015; Summers, 2016). Here, I contribute to this research agenda by providing support for the idea that a society's institutions governing collective action moderate how beliefs about environmental problems influence pro-environmental behaviors. In societies where institutionalized strategies emphasize individualized solutions, the effect of beliefs on behaviors should be amplified, while in societies where strategies emphasize collective solutions the belief-behavior relationship should be dampened.

## 2. Background and theory

### 2.1. Institutions and action

Institutions are the taken-for-granted ways individual and collective actors go about solving problems in a society (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991:11; Friedland and Alford, 1991:242; Mohr, 2000:58; Scott, 1991:165). These shared strategies signal to individuals what they should do given their positions, goals, and the challenges they face (DiMaggio, 1997:269). Prominent institutions in an actor's society signal to them that the strategies they employ are the 'natural' way of ordering material activity. The very prominence of hegemonic institutions precludes competing strategies from occurring to actors, reinforcing the perception that institutionalized forms are the objective way to address challenges they face (DiMaggio, 1997:269; Friedland and Alford, 1991:243; Meyer and Rowan, 1977:341). In this way, institutions can channel the same beliefs into different patterns of action in different societies by constraining how actors think about the natural course of action, given their beliefs (Thomas et al., 1987).

Evidence from experimental work supports the theoretical argument that embeddedness in institutional environments disposes actors to different strategies of action. Lynne Zucker finds that the more institutionalized a strategy is—the longer it is in place, the more it is reflected in organizational arrangements—the more it is employed by subjects to solve subsequent problems (Zucker, 1977:730). Later, Bednar et al. conclude that subjects in their experimental studies do not treat strategic games in isolation, instead, institutional primes emphasizing either cooperative or selfish strategies became heuristics that 'spillover' from one setting to another (2012:29). Both Zucker and Bednar et al. emphasize that this 'spillover' occurs whether the institutionalized strategy was an effective way for subjects to solve the new problem, or even if that problem is only tangentially related to the original institutional setting. Similarly, in a number of studies Aaron Kay and colleagues find that various cultural settings dispose individuals to interpret a range of different challenges and issues in very different ways. Particularly relevant to this study, Campbell and Kay find that an aversion to public policy versus free-market solutions alter subjects' interpretation of the validity of scientific evidence for climate change. In these studies, the solutions subjects supported to policy challenges are mediated by cultural and ideological commitments. Perception that a strategy is the right one to use is filtered through these lenses rather than consideration of what would be efficient for each problem as they occur (Campbell and Kay, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2012).

This experimental work suggests that a society's dominant institutions shape the actions of individuals embedded in them. This occurs when these institutionalized strategies are internalized as cognitive dispositions to prefer particular ways of doing things, or to not even perceive other strategies as possible. Once internalized, these institutionalized strategies 'spillover' to other social problems in observable patterns of behavior (Bednar et al., 2012; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991:24; Douglas, 1986:52; Martin, 2009:339; Zucker, 1977). It is a tenant of institutional theory that prominent organizational arrangements in a society provide us a measure of the highly institutionalized strategies ordering activity (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Schofer, 2001:810; Grief, 2006:17, 31; Meyer and Rowan, 1977:341, 346; Scott, 1991:179). Once in place, these organizational arrangements "act back on the producer", perpetuating the institution and reinforcing the perception that the strategy underlying them is the "taken-for-granted" way to address problems (Berger and Luckman, 1966:60, 61; Korpi and Palme, 1998:671). By comparing the long-standing organizational arrangements different societies have to address similar problems we get insight into how they have institutionalized different strategies to address those problems (Sewell Jr. 1992:26). Given institutional theory and experimental work on how these strategies diffuse, we should observe the relationship between beliefs and behaviors moderated across societies by differing institutional environments. I propose that the impact of what a person believes about environmental problems on their pro-environmental behaviors is such a relationship

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