



To: Place Directorate

From: Adrian Davis

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: Pluralistic ignorance and climate change - inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions

Top line: pluralistic ignorance can be a barrier to discussions about climate change among those most concerned about the issue and this barrier can be removed by correcting this pluralistic ignorance.

Despite the importance of public communication about climate change, most citizens rarely discuss the topic. In two studies, researchers have found that inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions (i.e. pluralistic ignorance) contribute to self-silencing among those concerned about climate change. This is a phenomenon commonly found across many areas of public policy eg support for racial segregation in the 1970s (most white Americans supported desegregation but believed that most others supported segregation; and norms of alcohol consumption (university students believing that norms of alcohol consumption were excessive but perceived that most others supported them). Self-silencing may be a form of impression management. Individuals desire to be viewed in a positive light and sharing an unpopular opinion could result in others perceiving them negatively. The desire to avoid being disliked has also been well established as a motive for self-silencing when one is a target of discrimination and prejudice. Researchers have thus proposed that people self-silence because of fear of isolation.¹

Recent research finds those who are aware of others' concern about climate change report greater willingness to discuss the issue than those with inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions. However, research demonstrates the effects of pluralistic ignorance in promoting public silence on the socially relevant topic of climate change.² Research results reveal the costs of pluralistic ignorance on discussion about climate change among those who do not doubt the science. Survey respondents who did not themselves doubt climate change were less willing to discuss the topic when they inaccurately believed fellow students would not share their opinion than when they accurately perceived they were in the majority. Another study reported by the same authors also shows that when accurate portrayals of others' beliefs were presented, those who were concerned about climate change were more willing to discuss the topic relative to concerned individuals led to inaccurately believe that others would not share their views. Both studies show that the reason individuals are more willing to discuss climate change when they perceive that others agree is because they expected to be respected more (i.e., appear more competent).

In both studies, pluralistic ignorance leads to self-silencing because perceptions that others do not share one's opinion are associated with expecting to be perceived as less competent in a conversation about climate change. One way to promote discussion is to correct pluralistic ignorance, informing those with inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions that a majority do share their concern.

¹ Holoiien, D., Fiske, S. 2013 Downplaying positive impressions: compensation between warmth and competence in impression management, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(1): 33-41.

² Geiger, N., Swim, J. 2016 Climate of silence: Pluralistic ignorance as a barrier to climate change discussion, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 47, 79-90.