

# Social Influences on Environmental Engagement

*A Conservation Psychology Webinar*

## Extended Q & A following Live Webinar 2/25/20

**How do social norms and encouraging pro-environmental behavior change from the social media realm to one-on-one interactions, and what best practices might you recommend?**

For social interaction, face-to-face is the gold standard in terms of impact and social influence. As you can imagine, the anonymity of social media often enables people to say things they wouldn't otherwise say in a face-to-face discussion.

**With respect to Facebook, I strive to maintain a diverse audience. Conversations are becoming more polarized. Do you have any thoughts about the pros connecting with like-minded people versus cons of creating an echo chamber?**

Good question – connecting with like-minded people can be a benefit in that it can reinforce people's beliefs, particularly knowing that there are others who agree with them. There is certainly comfort in having one's own opinion or belief validated by others. However, this process can happen for individuals who are antagonistic about the environment as well as those who are pro-environmental. Two vastly different belief structures, but whose ideas are similarly being reinforced by like-minded communities. Thus, the con is that these environments can become too homogeneous, where variability and diversity of thought and opinion is never considered, entertained or introduced into that social structure.

**Follow up from the first question. Has there been any research that the use of behaviors that may result in shame (e.g., the calling out on social media) has actually resulted in people becoming more entrenched in their problematic behavior?**

I can't name a paper off the top of my head, but for people who are so deeply entrenched in a belief, you can imagine that this could lead to some form of psychological reactance. Certainly, this likely all depends on who is administering shame. If the person is revered or held in high admiration by the individual, the likelihood for this reactance is probably lower than if the shame was delivered by someone who the individual did not respect and/or is associated with an 'outgroup'.

**Do we have examples available to see where people's behaviors changed to be aligned to the messages, as desired?**

There is a lot of research that has examined the impact of normative messages on individual's behavior. This work looks at how communicating the descriptive and injunctive norm impacts engagement and how (depending on whether the norms are aligned or misaligned as well as the referent group that is used). Robert Cialdini's book *Social Influence* details some of these studies and provides a lot of information about the dynamics of social norms, etc.

**If there are anti-environmental social norms in a group, is there any way to change those?**

**I would be interested if you offer any services or know organizations that offer help developing surveys?**

I would suggest partnering with an organization or institution that has researchers (or individuals) who are similarly interested in the work that you conduct. There are other places to look to that will have a price attached to it.

ANTIOCH  
UNIVERSITY  
NEW ENGLAND



CONSERVATION  
PSYCHOLOGY  
INSTITUTE

# Social Influences on Environmental Engagement

*A Conservation Psychology Webinar*

**Extended Q & A following Live Webinar 2/25/20**

**Sometimes people get overwhelmed with pro-environmental messages such as recycling, reusable alternatives, etc. How do we prevent/decrease this from happening but still inspire action?**

Good question – I think people can experience fatigue, stress and anxiety from being overloaded with messaging. This ties into another question, but offering ways for people to meaningfully engage in change is quite critical. This is particularly relevant with messages that leverage fear as a motivator. What we have come to learn about these types of messages, in particular, is that if they don't provide information about **how to act**, people can feel hopeless, helpless and immobile. Thus, providing messages about how to engage (the behaviors, steps associated with engaging in these behaviors and how the behaviors can make a difference) are rather critical in satisfying people's concerns about self-efficacy (that they have the capacity to engage) and response efficacy (and that their actions result in a desired outcome).

**This might be too late to add in but you mentioned that social norms are particularly effective with in-groups.. I'm curious if there are different tools to use social norms to prompt action in out-groups. For instance, I've read that a sense of obligation (like a church group having a potluck dinner for the new refugee family in town and feeling as though you have to participate in that) would prompt a shift towards a social norm of inclusion that otherwise wouldn't be there.**

Interesting – in terms of ingroup and outgroup dynamics one of the tips here is to forge and make salient a superordinate identity. We all wear many different hats and are associated with many different social identities, but there are certainly commonalities even amongst those who appear to be strikingly different in terms of their values, etc. Identifying those similarities and working within them is key.

**In the discussion of trends, like with the rise of single use plastic pollution, rather than moving towards new technologies is it salient to promote a return to the 'old way of doing things' i.e. bringing back the milkman rather than trying to innovate our way out of a crisis.**

This really depends on how you perceive change. Many believe in techno-salvation and that we will engineer our way out of this, whereas others believe in things like voluntary simplicity. Obviously, these approaches are rather different particularly in terms of the responsibility individuals incur, but you can see both emerging as pathways people pursue.

**How does cognitive dissonance relate to the angling data analysis you covered?**

We didn't explicitly investigate cognitive dissonance in this context, but it is a related concept. As you could imagine, folks who misperceive the social norm around handling fish in the vertical hold position may feel that tension manifest in certain situations. For instance, if an individual personally rejects the practice (believes it is inappropriate), but may either engage in the action because they misperceive that everyone else is doing it or fails to speak to their beliefs in a group setting because they are not in the 'ingroup' so to speak.

ANTIOCH  
UNIVERSITY  
NEW ENGLAND



CONSERVATION  
PSYCHOLOGY  
INSTITUTE

# Social Influences on Environmental Engagement

*A Conservation Psychology Webinar*

**Extended Q & A following Live Webinar 2/25/20**

**Interested in advice for making a lasting impact with people in a short amount of time. I work as a park ranger with a visitor center that has thousands of people visiting each day. Interactions are many and usually short. When communicating on the topic of climate change, what tactics are most meaningful?**

Great question – working under such temporal constraints is difficult. The biggest piece of advice for communicating on the topic of climate change is to make the issue personally relevant to the individual. Certainly this is a challenge when you might not have time to know something about them, but distilling information in way that individuals can relate to is critical (while at the same time providing an outlet for them to act on this information). Lots of people are concerned and informed about climate change but may simultaneously lack an understanding (ability/access/privilege) for how to take action and more importantly, that their actions can make a difference.

**It seems that advertising uses the same or similar strategies. Do you have any thoughts to offer about overcoming the disconnect between the messages being delivered in advertising versus those delivered through environmental messaging?**

Good thought – there are a lot of similarities between marketing and environmental messaging, as both are concerned with the fundamental task of how to frame information (or products in the case of marketing) that make it more appealing or personally relevant to the individual (or consumer). In conservation psychology, we often use a framework called community based social marketing. It provides a structure for approaching behavior change that draws on marketing ideas, but the goal is to promote engagement with pro-social and pro-environmental behaviors. This line of research also has strong connections (and use) in the domain of public health and encouraging health-related behaviors.

**Thank you so much for presenting this! It was so informative. I am interested in using race/ethnicity as an ingroup characteristic. My main interest is determining the connection of Latinx/Latino communities to the environment. What are some of limitations in choosing to survey such a broad ingroup such as race and ethnicity?**

There are lot of considerations when conducting a survey and research, generally. First – it really depends on who your audience is and what you want to say. One consideration here is scale. Are you thinking about a local community or the United States as a whole? Surveys can be useful when working with large numbers and exploring issues at a basic level. Interviews and other participatory approaches can be more beneficial for exploring topics in depth, and particularly helpful when working with individuals from vulnerable, disenfranchised or underrepresented communities. The next Conservation Psychology webinar will talk about participatory research practices!

Thank you to our presenter, Dr. Meaghan Guckian, for providing these written responses to those questions we did not have time to address during the live session.

**ANTIOCH**  
**UNIVERSITY**  
NEW ENGLAND



**CONSERVATION**  
**PSYCHOLOGY**  
**INSTITUTE**