



Social Norms, Climate Change, and the Energy Crisis We Face

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This post is [Robert Cialdini's](#) testimony to the Subcommittee on Research and Science Education, House Committee on Science and Technology, on the topic of "The Contribution of the Social Sciences to the Energy Challenge," September 25, 2007. A link to the committee's session (which involved other prominent social scientists such as Dr. Robert Bordley, John "Skip" A. Laitner, Dr. Jerry Ellig, and Dr. Duane Wegener) can be found [here](#).

I bring this to you for many reasons, but most of all to generate a discussion of extant social norms in the social scientific realm with regard to energy and environment as well as to generate a discussion about the state of our study of those norms. Plus, I just think loads of Bob Cialdini, who is Regents' Professor of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University; Cialdini has written many important tomes on applied psychology, and I suggest you read as many of them as you can.

Abstract

Social norms, which refer to what most people do (descriptive social norms) and what most people approve (injunctive social norms), are remarkably powerful in directing human action. Social science research has uncovered the most successful ways to incorporate norms into messages designed to produce socially desirable conduct.

Studies in several environmental contexts (e.g., home energy conservation, household recycling, hotel conservation efforts) show that (1) energy users severely underestimate the role of social norms in guiding their energy usage, (2) communications that employ social norm-based appeals for pro-environmental behavior are superior to those that employ traditional persuasive appeals, and (3) even though these highly effective social norm-based appeals are nearly costless—requiring no large technological fixes, tax incentives, or regulatory changes—they are rarely (and sometimes mistakenly) delivered.

Testimony to the Subcommittee on Research and Science Education, House Committee on Science and Technology. At the hearing on: The Contribution of the Social Sciences to the Energy Challenge, September 25, 2007.

Robert B. Cialdini, Regents' Professor of Psychology and Marketing, Arizona State University

Chairman Baird, Ranking Member Ehlers, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is my pleasure to be here today to testify on the Contribution of the Social Sciences to the Energy Challenge. I believe that the social and behavioral sciences do indeed hold tremendous potential to influence individual and collective behaviors effecting energy conservation, providing that we understand how to craft the message.

Here's why. It is standard practice when advocating for action among policymakers (e.g., legislative or other governmental officials) to emphasize the breadth of a problem. And, that makes sense because policymakers can be expected to provide additional resources or regulations to address those abuses that appear to them most widespread. However, a different—and even opposite—logic may apply when communicating with the public about a problem. To understand that logic, consider the following incident.

Not long ago, a graduate student of mine visited the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona with his fiancée—a woman he described as the most honest person he'd ever known, someone who had never taken a paperclip or rubber band without returning it. They quickly encountered a park sign warning visitors against stealing petrified wood, "OUR HERITAGE IS BEING VANDALIZED BY THE THEFT OF 14 TONS OF WOOD EVERY YEAR." While still reading the sign, he was shocked to hear his fiancée whisper, "We'd better get ours now."

What could have spurred this wholly law-abiding young woman to want to become a thief and to deplete a national treasure in the process? I believe it has to do with a mistake that park officials made when creating that sign. They tried to alert visitors to the park's theft problem by telling them that many other visitors were thieves. In so doing, they stimulated the behavior they had hoped to suppress by making it appear commonplace—when, in fact, less than 3% of the park's millions of visitors have ever taken a piece of wood.

Park officials are far from alone in this kind of error. Those responsible for developing and enforcing public policy blunder into it all the time. Teenage suicide prevention programs inform students of the alarming number of adolescent suicides and, research shows, cause participants to become more likely to see suicide as a possible solution to their problems. When publicizing cases of school violence, news outlets assemble accounts of incident after incident and, in the process, spawn the next one. During prominently announced crackdowns on the problem, government officials decry the frequency of tax evasion and, as demonstrated by one follow-up study, increase tax cheating the next year (Kahan, 1997). Although their claims may be both true and well-intentioned, the creators of these information campaigns have overlooked something basic about the communication process: Within the lament "Look at all the people who are doing this undesirable thing" lurks the powerful and undercutting message "Look at all the people who are doing it." And, one of the fundamental lessons of human psychology is that people follow the crowd. I am concerned that this point is being missed in our attempts to communicate the importance of environmental protection and energy conservation within our communities.

I think there is a better way to proceed. We need be diligent in making clear to the public that many unwelcome actions are performed by a small minority of the population. For instance, let's consider the case of littering. Few citizens litter with any frequency; most take care to preserve the environment. The key to an enlightened public policy approach to litter is to deliver the

message that even one abandoned newspaper can spread to despoil a pristine park or beach, that even one cigarette butt flipped from a car can ignite a devastating fire, that even one carelessly discarded plastic container can endanger wildlife, and, most important, that even one piece of litter can begin an accumulation that creates the mistaken—but contagious—impression that we all litter. It's not even remotely true that we are a nation of despoilers, and we shouldn't be misled into believing that it is. Instead, armed with the knowledge that, as a citizenry, we do care about our environment, we should focus on marginalizing the few who don't care.

Would such an approach work in other environmental arenas? My colleagues and I at Arizona State University have done research indicating that it well might. At the Petrified Forest, we erected a pair of signs in different areas. The first urged visitors not to take wood and depicted a scene showing three thieves in action. After passing that sign, visitors became over twice as likely to steal than before! Our other sign also urged visitors not to take wood, but it depicted a lone thief. Visitors who passed it became nearly half as likely to steal than before (Cialdini, 2003). I believe that this lesson applies to other forms of environmental offenses such as energy wastage. The secret is to avoid validating the deviant actions of a small minority of wrongdoers by making them appear the rule rather than the exception. Otherwise, we assure that a few rotten apples will spoil the barrel.

In addition, we should be sure to raise the profile of the majority that does act pro-environmentally, because that spurs others to follow suit. For instance, with our students, my fellow environmental researcher, Wes Schultz of California State University-San Marcos, and I obtained support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to study how descriptive social norms (the perception of what most people do in a situation) can influence energy conservation decisions. Our survey of nearly 2,500 Californians showed that those who thought their neighbors were conserving were more likely to conserve themselves. But, at the same time, almost all of the survey respondents underestimated the conservation efforts of their neighbors. In a follow-up study, we placed door hangers on the doors of San Diego-area residents once a week for a month. The door hangers carried one of four messages, informing residents that (1) they could save money by conserving energy, or (2) they could save the earth's resources by conserving energy, or (3) they could be socially responsible citizens by conserving energy, or (4) the majority of their neighbors tried regularly to conserve energy—information we had learned from a prior survey. We also include a control group of residents in the study whose door hanger simply encouraged energy conservation but provided no rationale. Even though our prior survey indicated that residents felt that they would be least influenced by information regarding their neighbors' energy usage, this was the only type of door hanger information that led to significantly decreased energy consumption, almost 2 kWh/day (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). This suggests a clear way to increase conservation activity—by trumpeting the true levels of conservation that are going unrecognized.

To investigate this idea, we examined resource conservation choices in upscale hotel rooms, where guests often encounter a card asking them to reuse their towels. As anyone who travels frequently knows, this card may urge the action in various ways. Sometimes it requests compliance for the sake of the environment; sometimes it does so for the sake of future generations; and sometimes it exhorts guests to cooperate with the hotel in order to save resources. What the card never says, however, is that (according to data from the Project Planet

Corporation that manufactures the cards) the majority of guests do reuse their towels when given the opportunity. We suspected that this omission was costing the hotels—and the environment—plenty.

Here's how we tested our suspicion. With the collaboration of the management of an upscale hotel in the Phoenix area, we put one of four different cards in its guestrooms. One of the cards stated "HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT," which was followed by information stressing respect for nature. A different card stated "HELP SAVE RESOURCES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS," which was followed by information stressing the importance of saving energy for the future. A third type of card stated "PARTNER WITH US TO HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT," which was followed by information urging guests to cooperate with the hotel in preserving the environment. A final type of card stated "JOIN YOUR FELLOW CITIZENS IN HELPING TO SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT," which was followed by information that the majority of hotel guests do reuse their towels when asked. The outcome? Compared to the first three messages, the final (social norm) message increased towel reuse by an average of 34% (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2007).

Two things are noteworthy about the results of the hotel study. First, the message that generated the most participation in the hotel's towel recycling program was the one that no hotel (to our knowledge) has ever used. Apparently, this simple but effective appeal didn't emerge from a history of trial and error to become a hotel "best practice." Instead, it emerged from a scientifically-based understanding of human psychology. This points out the need to call on social scientific research in a systematic fashion to help advance sound environmental policy. For instance, in case of hotel conservation programs, the average 150-room hotel would save 72,000 gallons of water, 39 barrels of oil, and would obviate the release 480 gallons of detergent into the environment in the course of a year if guests complied with the requests.

The second notable aspect of the hotel study was that the significant increase in program participation was nearly costless. In most cases, for an organization to boost effectiveness by 34%, some expensive steps have to be taken; typically, organizational structure, focus, or personnel must be changed. In this instance, however, none of that was necessary. Rather, what was required was a presentation of the facts about the preferred behavior of the majority.

Conclusion

In sum, when communicating with the public, it is important to avoid trying to reduce the incidence of a damaging problem by describing it as regrettably frequent. Such an approach, while understandable, runs counter to the findings of social science regarding the contagiousness of social behavior, even socially harmful behavior. Moreover, often, the problem under consideration is not widespread at all. It only comes to seem that way by virtue of a vivid and impassioned presentation of its dangers. Instead, it would be better to honestly inform our audience of the environmental peril resulting from even a small amount of the undesirable conduct. Furthermore, when most people are behaving responsibly toward the environment, we'd be less than responsible ourselves if we failed to publicize that fact, as the social science evidence is plain that the information will serve both to validate and stimulate the desired action.

References

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Biography of

Robert B. Cialdini, Ph. D.

Robert B. Cialdini is Regents' Professor of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University, where he has also been named W. P. Carey Distinguished Professor of Marketing. He has taught at Stanford University and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He has been elected president of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology. He is the recipient of the Distinguished Scientific Achievement Award of the Society for Consumer Psychology, the Donald T. Campbell Award for Distinguished Contributions to Social Psychology, and the (inaugural) Peitho Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Science of Social Influence. Professor Cialdini's book *Influence: Science and Practice*, which was the result of a three-year program of study into the reasons that people comply with requests in everyday settings, has sold over a million copies while appearing in numerous editions and twenty-two languages