Kadyn Southern

Tammy Stone

English Composition II

4/9/2025

The Power of One

Imagine if every person on Earth decided that their actions didn't matter. No recycling, no turning off lights, no voting for climate policies– just collective apathy towards an increasingly worrying issue. It's a terrifyingly plausible world, and it begins with one seemingly harmless thought: "I'm just one person. What difference can I make?" There are, undoubtedly, many people who would agree with the statement, and that is precisely the issue. To gather more research on the topic, a survey was created and distributed among the 2025 graduating class of Augusta High School. It was found that the overwhelming majority of respondents answered that they believe individual actions make a difference, yet zero respondents answered that they had made a single environmentally-motivated change to their lifestyle within the last year. This disconnect between belief and action leads to a larger truth: without individual action, there is no collective action. Individuals *do* make a noticeable impact on climate change, and the contributions of the individual lay the groundwork for meaningful, transformative changes on a global scale.

The clear contradiction between the personal beliefs and the tangible actions of the class was not a fluke, or even outside of the norm– it's something that is consistent with society in the United States as a whole. To go in more detail on the results of the survey conducted by Southern, here are some more relevant facts: zero respondents answered that they weren't

concerned with climate change and 77% answered that they were between moderately concerned and very concerned with climate change. Additionally, all of those who participated in the survey responded that they believed collective actions were effective in slowing climate change to varying degrees. And yet, despite their beliefs, there were zero respondents who answered that they had made any lifestyle changes, regardless of how minor, with the intention of reducing their individual environmental impact. A study done on climate change helplessness and energy behaviors comes to the same conclusion as this survey: "Though people [Americans] generally believe in climate change and are concerned about the threat, there is a psychological disconnect between individual actions and their consequences for climate change" (Salomon et al. 3). These respondents clearly understand climate change and the grave consequences of it if it continues at its current rate, and yet there's a lack of any real action taken to combat it. Why is this?

One of the largest reasons as to why so few individuals actually take action to slow climate change is because it seems simply out of our individual control. Something as immense as global climate change feels utterly disproportionate in magnitude to any action that a single person can take. To quote the above-mentioned climate change helplessness study again– "It is hard to imagine, for example, that turning up the air conditioning on a hot day has anything to do with the average global temperature and its harmful consequences for life on our planet." (Salomon et al. 4) Our behavior, as a species, is largely influenced by its immediate consequences– this theory is called operant conditioning, something that was coined by B.F. Skinner, an American behaviorist and psychologist. This theory of learning simply states: "Behavior that is reinforced (rewarded) will likely be repeated, and behavior that is punished

will occur less frequently." (McLeod) To continue with the example in the quote above, and relate it to operant conditioning, turning on the AC on a hot day has two main consequences to the average person: relief from heat, a positive, and a higher electric bill, a negative. The decision to turn on the air conditioning will generally come from comparing these two factors. The fact that a simple everyday action could contribute to something as abstract and long-term as climate change just isn't palpable. The consequences are too distant and simply inconceivable to notice in the short-term. The cost-to-benefit analysis we naturally do doesn't generally include the future of the planet when the discomfort of the present is right in front of us.

What can be done when climate change seems so far beyond our control that people seldom feel compelled to act? Part of the answer, as was mentioned above, lies in how we weigh our decisions. Most simply don't factor in the environmental consequences of our actions, not even as an afterthought. To again quote the study by Salomon et al., it can be inferred that this is a learned behavior: "after people read that their behavior has little impact on climate change, they demoralized energy use and dampened their intentions to conserve, and subsequently reported more energy use over the following week" (Salomon et al. 26). They continue to say that breaking the hold that climate change helplessness has over us is of utmost importance for realizing behavioral change, both personally and in others. Messages and media that "promote efficacy beliefs promote
moralization and thereby empower people toward these small, but meaningful, actions." (Salomon et al. 34) If behavior is to be changed, we first have to change the way people see their own impact.

An article by Matthew Hornsey, Cassandra Chapman, and Dexter Oelrichs on the ripple effects of individual climate actions states that “understanding how to encourage the public to think and act in more climate-friendly ways is a critical priority for responding to the threat of climate change.” The article continues on to discuss several studies that attempted to experimentally manipulate the perceived efficacy of individual actions against climate change. These studies found that when people believe their personal behaviors– things like reducing meat consumption, driving less, or conserving household energy– inspired others or contributed to a larger movement, they were significantly more likely to engage in those behaviors themselves. In contrast, when individuals feel their efforts are meaningless and isolated, motivation plummets. This highlights a key part of the problem: people need to feel that their actions matter beyond their own bubble. Without that sense of connection to something bigger, it becomes easier to fall into apathy or inaction. Encouraging people to view their efforts as part of a collective push creates a feedback loop of empowerment, rather than discouragement.

By presenting environmentally-friendly actions as socially contagious– that is, actions that can influence peers, set visible examples, and contribute to shifting cultural norms– we can create a behavioral domino effect. The study on ripple effects, previously mentioned, talks about the multiplier effects that these individual actions have, which lead to large-scale collective impact. One person recycling more or being more conservative with energy usage won’t stop global warming, but it might encourage a roommate to do the same, which could then spread to friends, family, and beyond. Over time, the ripples created from these drops in the ocean add up. This kind of cascading influence turns isolated acts into wide-spread

momentum, which is far more difficult to ignore or reverse. Hornsey and others wrap up the article with the quote: “if individuals can be taught about the ways in which their individual efforts influence their peers, businesses, and governments, then their perception of efficacy will increase, with flow-on effects for pro-environmental intentions and behaviors” (Hornsey et al.).

By this point, two things should be clear: climate change helplessness is a learned behavior– and therefore, is able to be unlearned– and individual actions, while small on their own, create ripples that reach far beyond their originator. But psychological and mental barriers aren’t the only things standing in the way of people taking action against climate change. To fully understand what holds people back, we also need to look at the more practical obstacles that shape their everyday choices. In 2022, there was a study published by Johns Hopkins University on the perceived barriers in the way of climate change activism among people who stated that they were very concerned about climate change. 319 of such respondents were asked to indicate the barriers they faced, ranging from zero to twelve pre-arranged options. The median number of barriers faced was five, with the largest reason for a lack of involvement being “Other people are better at it than me,” with 57% of respondents citing this reason. This was followed closely by “I haven’t been trained,” “They haven’t been asked,” and “Did not know how to get involved” (Latkin et al.). This shows that for those who are already concerned with climate change, what’s holding them back is a lack of information, direction, and confidence. When over half of highly concerned individuals believe “other people are better at it,” it becomes clear that a large part of the problem isn’t apathy– it’s self-doubt and disconnection.

This lack of confidence and direction is not just an “I don’t have the knowledge of what

to do" issue, but a problem of communication. There is such an excess of information online and elsewhere that it's impossible to know what to believe or what to do. People might wholeheartedly care about climate change, but without knowing specifically what they can do, or specifically how they can do it, all of that undirected concern turns to paralysis. That's where a more accessible form of climate information can be useful: gray literature. Unlike dense peer-reviewed articles or jargon-heavy policy documents, gray literature includes things like community guides, infographics, non-profit websites, and reports by environmental organizations that are written in plain language for your average person. These sources often present practical, specific steps that individuals can take. As MacDonald and Manuel explain, gray literature is "used both within and outside governments primarily because the format (short documents, often two pages) fits the important role of informing. In addition, readability in an accessible manner is a key characteristic of these publications" (103).

The clarity and succinctness of gray literature make a large difference– people are much more likely to act when they're not being actively overwhelmed and confused by walls of text or academic language. MacDonald and Manuel continue by stating that nearly everybody encounters some form of gray literature in their daily lives. Additionally, they say that people at every level of society need concise and accessible information to back decisions and help them commit to actions that are necessary to "avert climate disaster." They conclude with this final statement: "Thus, recognizing the numerous roles that grey literature fulfills can inform citizens, managers, planners, and policy- and decision-makers in addressing the climate challenges facing society today" (107).

Though, not all gray literature is equally accessible. Some things, like conference papers,

briefing notes, or policy documents, while written to be clear and concise, often end up lacking in terms of accessibility. They can be buried in places where the average person wouldn't think to look, like obscure government pages or research journal web-portals that can feel like a maze. So, while governments might make two-page briefing notes (MacDonald & Manuel 103), they rarely land in the hands of the public domain. On the other hand, there are environmental organizations– especially NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund, the World Health Organization, and The Nature Conservancy– that actively use gray literature as a tool for advocacy and public engagement. Their information is distributed directly through digital platforms that people are already using, like websites and social media. These sources don't only inform, but also shape opinion, encourage participation, and provide actionable advice. As the article by MacDonald and Manuel notes, a single website can simultaneously "inform, advocate, and educate," making these materials far more versatile and approachable than traditional academic publications (MacDonald & Manuel 105). The format matters– when climate information is visible, easy to digest, and clearly tied to realizable action, it becomes far more likely to noticeably influence behavior. In this way, gray literature acts as a bridge between large institutions and the individual.

So, to restate the question from before: what can be done? Promote and spread the idea that individual actions do matter. Encourage taking action, as minor as it may be, and lay the foundation for change. While most people believe that climate change is real and is worth caring about, exceedingly few people are acting on that belief. That gap is made not by apathy, but by disconnection– both within and without the individual– along with self-doubt and a lack of clear direction. The abstract, immensely long-term nature inherent to an issue like climate

change makes it incredibly hard to connect present actions with future consequences. The learned helplessness that factors into this, however, can be reversed and unlearned through better communication and better, more encouraging messaging. When people see their behavior influencing others, the ripple effects can grow into wide-spread momentum. At the same time, however, practical barriers like a lack of training, information, or confidence stop even the most concerned individuals from getting involved. That's why gray literature– especially from accessible, transparent, environmentally-oriented NGOs– can be an invaluable resource in guiding and motivating every-day action to combat and slow climate change, as much of an uphill battle it may be. So, it must be said again: individuals *do* make a noticeable impact on climate change, and the contributions of the individual lay the groundwork for meaningful, transformative changes on a global scale.

Works Cited

Hornsey, Matthew J., et al. “Ripple Effects: Can Information about the Collective Impact of Individual Actions Boost Perceived Efficacy about Climate Change?” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 97, no. 104217, Nov. 2021, doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104217. Accessed 12 Apr. 2025.

Latkin, Carl, et al. “Perceived Barriers to Climate Change Activism Behaviors in the United States among Individuals Highly Concerned about Climate Change.” *Journal of Prevention*, vol. 44, Oct. 2022, doi.org/10.1007/s10935-022-00704-0. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

MacDonald, Bertrum H., and Patricia Manuel. “Information, Public Decision-Making, and Climate Change: The Many Roles of Grey Literature.” *Grey Journal*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2024, pp. 99–109, doi.org/10.26069/greynet-2024-000.501-gg.

McLeod, Saul. “Operant Conditioning: What It Is, How It Works, and Examples.” *Simply Psychology*, edited by Olivia Guy-Evans, 2025, www.simplypsychology.org/operant-conditioning.html. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

Salomon, Erika, et al. “Climate Change Helplessness and the (De)Moralization of Individual Energy Behavior.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2017, pp. 15–28, doi.org/10.1037/xap0000105. Accessed 12 Apr. 2025.

Southern, Kadyn. “Impacts on Climate Change” Online Survey. Google Forms, 2025, docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScLB0cuxXW_sNRr6TFjlvoNC0J1DGN7fPpTdzT0DV5kCrsxgQ.