

## Commentary

# A spiral of (in)action: Empowering people to translate their values in climate action

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Despite the urgency of mitigating climate change, climate action remains insufficient. People are therefore often seen as being unmotivated to take climate action. Yet, research suggests most people are motivated. To mitigate climate change, barriers that obstruct people from realizing their motivations need to be removed altogether.

“The evidence is clear: the time for action is now. We can halve emissions by 2030,” headlined the IPCC press release on April 4, 2022, published ahead of their AR6 Working Group III report, “Mitigation of climate change.”<sup>1</sup> To halve emissions by 2030 and limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, immediate and substantial action is needed at all levels of society. Yet, global emissions are still rising<sup>1,2</sup> and current climate policies and actions (including the recent US Inflation Reduction Act) are projected to only limit global warming to 2°C to 3°C above pre-industrial levels,<sup>2</sup> likely leading to severe climate change.<sup>1,2</sup> These projections may even prove overly optimistic in light of recent events, such as the US Supreme Court restricting the regulatory authority of the Environmental Protection Agency and the G7 decision to increase investments in natural gas as a consequence of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. An inevitable question therefore is: do people sufficiently care about climate change?

Many individuals—varying from everyday people<sup>3,4</sup> to policy makers<sup>3,5</sup>—assume people do not care about climate change, believing that people are primarily self-interested, and care and do little for collective problems.<sup>3–5</sup> However, research shows that this is not the case. People do strongly care about collective problems and climate change in particular,<sup>4–8</sup> as for instance indicated through their personal values (i.e., general life goals that guide people’s actions) (Figure 1).<sup>6,7</sup> Specifically, most people strongly endorse self-transcendence values (i.e., caring about the environment, nature, and other people) that motivate climate action, while

relatively weakly endorsing self-enhancement values (i.e., caring about possessions, status, and self-interest) that often inhibit climate action.<sup>6,7</sup> These values are also reflected in people’s climate beliefs, with most people across the world regarding climate change a global emergency that requires (urgent) action.<sup>8</sup>

As such, we argue that the key challenge in promoting climate action is not in making people care more about collective problems and climate change. Rather, we need to enable people to translate their already existent motivations into climate action. We discuss four key barriers that prevent people from translating their self-transcendence values into climate action and propose that comprehensive strategies are needed to address these barriers together.

## Climate actions benefit and threaten people’s values

Climate actions often benefit some values but threaten others. This can cause internal “value conflicts,” which form a barrier that may withhold people from translating their self-transcendence values into climate action. Individuals endorse all basic human values to at least some degree,<sup>6,7</sup> including self-transcendence and self-enhancement values. Even threats to relatively weakly endorsed values may hold people back from taking climate action when these threats are substantial enough.<sup>6</sup> For example, even people who prioritize self-transcendence values over self-enhancement values may not replace air travel with more sustainable alternatives (e.g., travelling via train) when doing so is associated with significant increases in traveling time, inconvenience, and ticket prices,

which pose a substantial threat to their self-enhancement values.

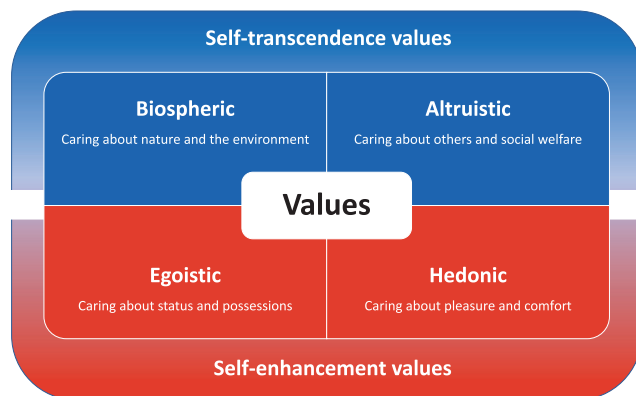
Critically, for many individual climate actions, threats to self-enhancement values (e.g., financial costs, inconvenience) are direct and immediately noticeable, meaning they may easily overshadow the often indirect and, on their own, smaller benefits for self-transcendence values (e.g., implications for climate change). Furthermore, research on loss aversion shows that threats typically outweigh equivalent benefits, meaning that climate action will only be taken when associated benefits are relatively larger than the perceived threats.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, people may be less likely to translate their self-transcendence values into climate action when such actions also pose threats to (other) values they possess.

## Motivated people may not know what to do, in what way

Individuals are unlikely to act on their self-transcendence values when they do not know how to do so. In this respect, a lack of knowledge poses a second barrier that may withhold people from translating their often strong self-transcendence values into climate action. Although most people are aware of climate change and its adverse consequences,<sup>8</sup> people do not always know which of their actions most contribute to it. For instance, many people either do not know or underestimate the substantial impact of their food choices on greenhouse gas emissions,<sup>10</sup> meaning they are unlikely to translate their self-transcendence values into sustainable food choices.

As well as not knowing the climate impact of their specific actions, people





**Figure 1. Motivational basis for climate action**

The basic human values that generally motivate (blue) and demotivate (red) climate action, forming a motivational basis for climate action.

may not know what sustainable alternatives are available to them, or how to implement these when they are available, which may in turn inhibit translation of self-transcendence values into climate action.<sup>10,11</sup> For instance, house owners are often unaware of various energy improvement options that might be available to them (e.g., insulation, energy generation and energy storage technologies), how to select and install these options, and how to use these options most effectively when implemented.

#### Not thinking about impact of choices on one's values

People are only guided by their self-transcendence values when they consider these values when making choices. Yet, there are many situations in which people do not consider their values when making choices, which forms a third barrier that could explain why people do not consistently translate their self-transcendence values into climate action. People for instance are unlikely to consider the consequences of actions for their values when they act out of habit.<sup>12</sup> That is, when they take an action they consistently do in a specific context without conscious consideration. For example, driving to work is a habit for many people. It is therefore unlikely that they will consider the implications of car use for their values when driving to work at the start of each working day. Similarly, actions can be embedded in cultural traditions (e.g., national dishes) where the action has been performed for a long time and is simply taken for granted.

People may also not consider their values due to situational constraints. For instance, in demanding situations (e.g., driving in busy traffic, being in a busy market), people may not have the cognitive capacity to think about their values when making choices (e.g., eco-drive, selection of sustainable products).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, situational factors may draw people's attention away from their self-transcendence values. Advertisements can for example make people focus on specific outcomes of a choice, such as finances, status or comfort, while pushing environmental outcomes into the background, making it less likely that people consider their self-transcendence values when making a decision.<sup>14,15</sup> In such cases, self-transcendence values are not likely to predict climate actions; not because people do not care, but simply because self-transcendence values are not considered when making decisions.

#### Inaction stimulates... inaction

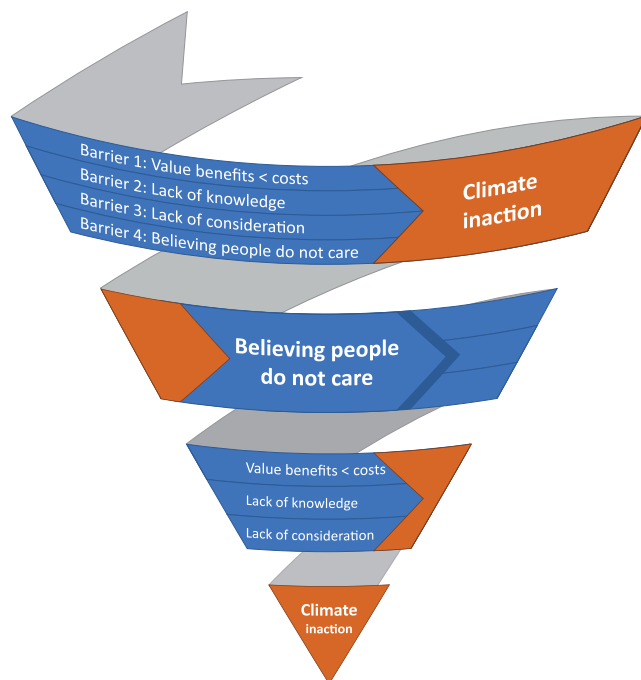
Concerningly, the climate inaction caused by the abovementioned barriers can give the impression that people do not care about climate change, which may in turn give rise to a fourth barrier for at least three reasons. First, people often want to be accepted by and belong to others, making them inclined to act in line with what they think others would do and care about. Believing that others do not take climate action, or do not care about climate change, may therefore discourage people from taking action themselves.<sup>6</sup> Second, people often consider the actions of others as indicative of the "sensible" thing to

do.<sup>16</sup> When others do not take climate action, people may therefore assume that there are good reasons for this. For instance, the notion that many people eat meat on a daily basis can be interpreted as if this is essential to a healthy diet, making people reluctant to choose more sustainable alternatives.<sup>17</sup> Third, underestimations of others' motivations to take climate action may affect the extent to which people consider their own climate actions useful. Specifically, climate change is a collective problem that can only be mitigated when many people take action.<sup>1</sup> People may therefore not see the benefits of their individual climate actions when they assume others will not act too.<sup>6</sup>

#### A spiral of (in)action

The misperception that others do not care and do little about climate change likely reinforces itself<sup>6,16</sup> and may maintain the other three barriers, causing a spiral of inaction (Figure 2). Indeed, the inaction that is caused by the misperception that others do not care about climate change is likely interpreted as if one does not care about climate change, thereby reaffirming the general idea that people do not care about climate change.<sup>4</sup> In addition, when the impacts of individuals' own climate actions are seen as useless because others do not act, people may be even less likely to believe that the benefits of their climate actions outweigh some (of their) costs (i.e., barrier 1).<sup>6,9</sup> Furthermore, believing others do not care about climate change can make people reluctant to provide feedback on unsustainable practices of others that could be changed, or inform them about possible climate actions they could take, in order to avoid social sanctions. This makes it even less likely that people learn what actions to change, in what ways (i.e., barrier 2),<sup>10,11,16</sup> or reflect on their unsustainable habits and traditions (barrier 3).<sup>12,16</sup>

On a positive note, the spiral may also work in reverse (Figure 3). When people see that others do care about nature, the environment, other people, and climate change, it may reduce the four barriers and stimulate individuals' climate action. For example, when people believe that others care about climate change and (are willing to) take climate action, individual climate actions may feel more useful, making people more likely to accept



**Figure 2. Spiral of inaction**

The self-maintaining and self-reinforcing process of climate inaction.

some disadvantages. Moreover, when people know that others care about climate change, they may more readily share knowledge on climate action and assist others in taking climate action.

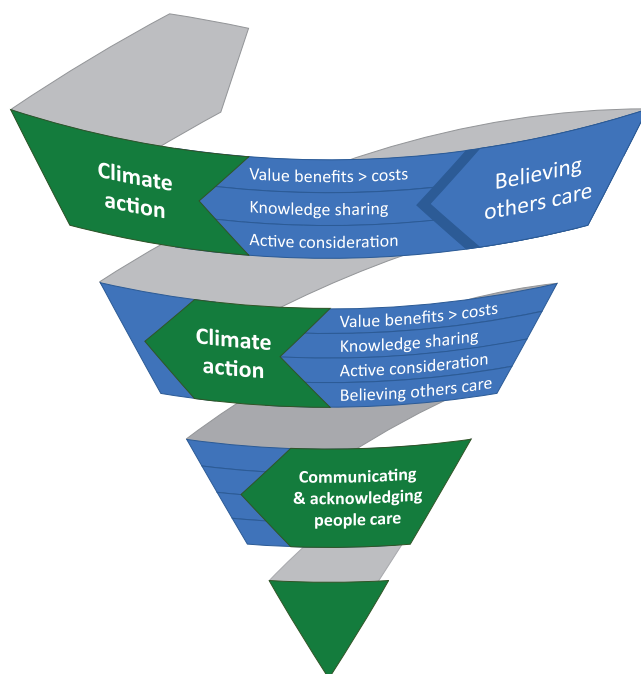
Furthermore, the more people adopt sustainable products or services, the better these products or services become. Indeed, high demand typically stimulates investments in development and produc-

tion processes, which often increases availability and quality, and reduces the prices of such products and services. For example, the increasing demand for solar PV panels has improved their availability, price competitiveness, and efficiency. Similarly, the increasing popularity of vegan food has increased the availability of plant-based meat alternatives and improved its taste and affordability.

### Governments and businesses can turn the spiral

Governments and businesses play a key role in turning a spiral of inaction as they are well-positioned to alleviate the four barriers for many people (e.g., citizens, employees).<sup>18</sup> In fact, their action is often required to enable people to turn their self-transcendence values into climate action. Many value conflicts, for instance, arise from how society is currently organized, often making unsustainable options easier and cheaper (e.g., flying, animal-based products) than sustainable alternatives (e.g., train, plant-based products). Governments and businesses could reduce value conflicts by making climate actions more attractive (e.g., through subsidies, improving infrastructure, and increasing the quality and supply of sustainable products) or unsustainable actions less attractive (e.g., through taxes, laws, and regulations). Moreover, they can play a key role in informing people about climate action and communicating the apparent strong public motivation to take climate action. In addition, they can help disrupt unsustainable habits and traditions, by making them harder to perform (e.g., disabling cars to enter or park in certain areas, forcing people to reconsider their car use) or by changing defaults (e.g., making a vegan dish the standard option).<sup>12</sup>

The action that is currently taken by governments and businesses typically addresses only one or few barriers at a time. However, to enable people to turn their self-transcendence values into climate action, multiple barriers need to be addressed simultaneously since the persistence of one barrier may make the efforts of reducing other barriers ineffective. Moreover, governments and businesses need to be consistent in what they do and communicate; effects of removing barriers (e.g., as part of the Inflation Reduction Act) will be limited when at the same time actions are



**Figure 3. Spiral of action**

The self-maintaining and self-reinforcing process through which climate action can be promoted.

supported that clearly impede climate targets (e.g., limiting the Environmental Protection Agency's authority and increasing investments in natural gas). Such inconsistency may be interpreted as if climate change is not that urgent after all and may cast doubt over the sincerity and trustworthiness of governments and businesses as a partner in addressing climate change. Limited and inconsistent action by governments and businesses may therefore strengthen the perception that they, as well as everyday people, care little about climate change (i.e., barrier 4), likely accelerating—instead of reversing—a spiral of inaction. Hence, to enable people to turn their self-transcendence values into climate action, barriers should be simultaneously and consistently reduced by governments and businesses, thereby creating the right conditions for a spiral of action.

For such comprehensive action to happen, it is important that governments and businesses better recognize the self-transcendence values of their constituents and clients,<sup>18</sup> which often are more supportive of climate action than they think. Indeed, governments and businesses appear reluctant to address self-transcendence values and implement comprehensive climate action out of fear for losing votes or clients.<sup>5</sup> Everyday people and the media can also help to correct misperceptions that people care little about collective problems and climate change, as they should also better communicate their, and acknowledge each other's, self-transcendence values. This could reassure governments and businesses to be bolder in implementing comprehensive and consistent action, giving people in turn the opportunity to demonstrate that they are as motivated and willing to take climate action as

they report to be. Only when people throughout society show they deeply care about climate change, and are supported in doing so by governments and businesses, can we halve our emissions and keep average global warming below 1.5°C.

#### DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

L.S. is a member of the journal's advisory board.

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