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RECONCEPTUALIZING THE INDIVIDUAL AS A SOCIAL ACTOR IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

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Environmental communication research over the last several decades has focused a great deal on individuals: measuring their opinions and behaviors, and identifying a panoply of variables (demographic factors, ideology, awareness, efficacy, risk perception, place, politics, identity) that potentially influence communication with them. From survey work on attitudes to ecocritical analyses of individual texts, individuals are the unit of analysis for a broad range of research (Norgaard 2011: 209). Current research also focuses on how discrete messages influence individuals: “framing” analyses and “media effects” studies, the strength or nature of rhetorical arguments, use of visualization and metaphors, and the credibility of sources.

In part because much environmental communication research relies on individual self-reports (which can involve a significant social desirability response¹ regarding the environment), what we have learned about individuals is often limited. We know generally current attitudes and opinions (Hornsey et al. 2016), and reports of their past behavior and/or intentions for future behavior. For example, research has evaluated the effectiveness of frames about biofuels (Raymond and Delshad 2016: 508) and wind energy (Hooff et al. 2017: 700), concern about climate change (Leiserowitz et al. 2008, Swim and Geiger 2017: 568), the effect of ad type on green purchase intention (Schmuck et al. 2018: 414), and predictions of knowledge about climate change (Kahlor and Rosenthal 2009: 380). Individual cognitions and emotions about environmental issues often are presented simply and unproblematically, as though they are solely a person’s autonomous conclusions, free from influence by the larger world beyond.

In a time when environmental communication is viewed as a crisis discipline (Cox 2007) replete with urgency, it is prudent to reexamine how environmental communicators and scholars think about, research, and communicate with individuals. Many of us conceptualize and operationalize individuals as psychological micro-units, even though they are profoundly shaped by social environments and political and economic cultures that can render the

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strongest of individual behavioral intentions impotent. A larger field of vision is crucial; virtually all environmental issues are “collective action problems” (Kinzig et al. 2013: 170), therefore actions by isolated individuals are decidedly not the key to addressing environmental problems. Individual personal change—even on a large scale—should not be confused with the social change required to address these problems.

Here, I discuss the numerous limitations of an “autonomous individual” approach, and I make a case for reconceptualizing individuals as products of a wide variety of interactions, institutions, and experiences at the meso and macro levels. Next, I embed individuals in a more holistic view of social change. Finally, I discuss considerations for environmental communication and research that embody this broader, cross-cutting approach.

Limitations of the “autonomous individual”

The first limitation is the long-standing tradition of conceptualizing individuals as vessels to be filled with the “right” communication. This focus on individuals seems based on the belief that more or better information, frames, metaphors, credible sources, and so on will move people to understand and act on environmental problems (Brulle 2010: 82). This supposes that (certain) individuals need only receive the information—about toxics or water quality or climate change—to address these issues. “Information deficit” thinking treats communication as one-way and uncomplicated and audiences as passive and unconnected to larger society. Even though research has largely dispelled the information deficit model (Nisbet and Scheufele 2009: 1768, Sturgis and Allum 2004: 55), and concluded that information and knowledge alone are not powerful enough to engage the public and/or produce action, much research continues to perceive individuals as sovereign, appropriate targets of environmental messages (such as ever-popular framing studies).

In our highly individualistic Western culture, we believe strongly in autonomous and powerful individuals with boundless free will: “I can think and do exactly as I want.” In an individual-centric culture, it makes sense that marketers, politicians, and communication researchers believe that reaching and influencing individuals is efficacious and valuable.

However, all of us face considerable barriers and constraints in our actions as individuals, be they economic, ideological, physical, or normative. Those with less social and economic power, for example, face greater environmental harm and often have less of a voice. Cultural pressure about climate science is exerted in churches, workplaces, and at dinner tables. An individual might have no mass transit options or normative social support for using it (even though she may voice strong intentions to take the bus when answering survey questions).

Another limitation of the individual focus is the tendency to conflate personal change with social change. In my city, I receive environmental messages to “Slow the Flow, Save H₂O” and to curtail driving on air pollution days. Environmental communication messages tell us to turn down the thermostat, recycle, eat less meat, and buy “green.”

These messages call upon individuals to undertake small, voluntary, consumer-oriented, “pro-environmental” behaviors. Voluntary personal change, a “green” lifestyle, and “simple living” are indeed commendable. Such actions may make us feel better and believe we are contributing to a “solution,” when in fact individuals’ home-based consumption constitutes an extremely small portion of resource use. One source puts individual consumption at just 10 percent of the total water usage, 25 percent of the energy, and 3 percent of municipal waste (Jensen 2009: 18). (Of course, the resources used by industries to produce food, make laptops, and manufacture bath towels don’t get put in the individual’s energy-use column,

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though our collective consumption drives these processes. But those topics—and consumption generally—are rarely the focus of behavior campaigns.)

Yet, much environmental communication research tests messages and campaigns that position individual action as the “solution.” “It’s good for the environment” might be the communicated motivation for reducing energy, but normatively, using ever-more energy is what Americans do. One campaign to reduce home energy use (Corbett 2018: 192) discovered that when people learned their neighbors used more energy than they did, their own usage increased. This is not to say that individual action is not important and significant, but personal and voluntary action does not come close to the scale of change required (Capstick et al. 2015: 49). Even if all the people on all the blocks in my city did indeed turn down the heat and turn off lights, it would not nudge the dial on total energy use (nor attendant air emissions and climate change).

Placing the burden of action on the individual for reducing energy use ignores numerous, significant barriers and constraints not under individual control: the utility’s energy source, state building standards for insulation and construction, electronic appliance design, or the glowing lights built into electronics and outlets. As noted, significant normative influence affects others’ energy consumption, including leaving lights on and doors and windows open.

Nowadays in the U.S., more people recycle than vote. Recycling is an easy, voluntary, personal action that makes people feel better, even though on some levels it perpetuates ever-increasing consumption and linear disposal (Corbett 33). Despite all the people reporting that they recycle, only 1 in 10 plastic bottles is recycled and oceans are choked by plastic trash. Plastic is a forever product that never fully degrades and whose quality decreases when recycled. Even so, if you don’t recycle, you might feel guilty (regardless of whether you have access to recycling facilities). With the exception of a few states requiring deposits on aluminum, the entire burden for an item’s disposal is placed solely in the individual’s lap, not in the lap of product producers (that pass along disposal costs to municipalities). Even for the “easy” behavior of recycling, targeting individual actions assigns blame to people who may lack options and doesn’t address the significant social change needed beyond the individual.

Thus, another limitation of individual action is relying on the collective (and voluntary) cooperation of all individuals to protect earth elements we humans hold in common: air, water, land, plants, minerals, and so on. Environmental issues are classic “collective action problems,” where sufficient collective action benefits everyone, but some individuals will not comply, thinking the action too “costly,” not in their self-interest, or physically impossible. For example, if I take the bus to campus on a bad-air day, I have helped protect the air we hold in common, though I receive no immediate, tangible benefit for my action (other than my conscience). Meanwhile, my neighbor receives no immediate harm for his driving, even though he benefits from those who didn’t drive, the classic “free rider” effect. And, my neighbor’s free-riding may be beyond his personal control, the result of the car-architecture of cities and the industrial economy.

Environmental problems (from air pollution and climate change to littering) cannot be “solved” by voluntary individual actions, and instead require various forms of “coercion” (regulations, fines and enforcement, changes in technology or the physical environment) along with communication (Janssen et al. 2010) to move the collective to action that benefits all. There is a crucial need here for communication beyond the individual level, such as the larger cultural and institutional changes needed to protect the common good. If a workplace adjusts its policies about commuting and mass transit, communication at the level of the organization is crucial, and it would contribute to a shift of social norms about workplace travel and telecommuting.

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A final limitation of action at the individual level is the lack of power and authority possessed by most individuals. While it's true that one person can change the world (a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King), and that activist movements can effect change from particular targets, most individuals lead much quieter, "normal" lives.

Let's say "Samantha" does her part and recycles newspapers and cans, tries not to waste food, and conserves water inside and outside her house. She feels guilty that she drives so much, but she doesn't live near any mass transit. And climate change makes her feel even worse; it's frightening and insurmountable. She says she's not the type to join an environmental group.

The burden and blame placed on individual Samanthas is enormous. There are very real limitations of the power of isolated individuals undertaking personal changes. Facing weighty issues like air pollution, drought, and climate change by yourself is intimidating and paralyzing. There is a tendency to "blame the individual" for not taking the "correct" action, even when the barriers are embedded deep in the social-structural and economic environments. The resulting guilt and shame are not motivating. The most efficacious thing for Samantha (and the communication researchers who study her) is to reconceptualize her as a social actor instead of an isolated individual.

Individuals as social actors

Thinking of individuals as social actors involves the power of social norms of behavior, the political economy and physical environment, how "facts" are given life and meaning communally, and how individual behavior is indeed socially organized. To illustrate how individuals are products of their larger interactions, I'll begin with an anecdote.

In 2007, the Utah Division of Air Quality began a campaign against idling to help Salt Lake City meet air pollution targets. Soon, "Turn the Key, Be Idle-Free" stickers appeared on some cars and public locations, notably schools. In 2011, Salt Lake City passed a no-idling ordinance (though it exempted cars on private property); after a handful of news stories, publicity largely ceased. Today, many residents idle their cars, and many don't know the ordinance exists (in part because it is rarely if ever enforced).

I see idling cars when I walk my neighborhood—sometimes four or five cars on a cold morning idling in driveways. I see cars idling (sometimes sans drivers) in front of stores, restaurants, and offices. People idle cars while waiting to pick someone up. I've seen people at city parks eating lunch inside their cars with the engine running. I've watched people have long conversations in front of their respective idling cars. Even city buses idle at the end of their route on campus, right in front of "No Idling" signs. Idling your vehicle is a common, observable behavior.

If communication researchers investigated why the idling campaign (and ordinance) has not changed behavior, a typical approach would be to survey individual car owners about their campaign message exposure, knowledge about the law, idling behavior, and a host of individual attributes. The results might be used to get "better information" to residents so that they understand the problem and promise to comply. After all, turning the key is a pretty easy, pro-environmental behavior. Instead, research designed to understand individuals as social actors would look at individual idling behavior in the context of social interactions, social norms, cultural conventions, and contradictory messages of the political economy.

Drivers do not randomly decide one day to leave the car running. An individual's environmental sentiments or actions—about pesticides, nuclear waste, plastics, or climate change—are the product of her social and cultural interactions and influences. Deciding what

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to pay attention to or what to ignore—and, what to do or not do—is a social process that we learn in interaction with the people around us (Zerubavel 2006: 47). In other words, our assessment of the world and our actions in it are socially constructed (Norgaard 5); the larger social structure shapes our lives and our relationships to each other and to the environment.

If you're attuning to what social others tell you is noteworthy or of no value, you are a social actor, not a wholly autonomous individual. It's how you decide that plastic straws are a no-no, but that idling is okay; at the macro level, both concern how fossil fuel is valued (or not).

Individuals are strongly influenced by their social referent groups: family of origin, peers and friends, fellow employees, church members, and social and recreational groups. Some scholars maintain that our belief systems are formed to a large extent by the referent groups to which we belong (Hoffman 2015: 16). We generally endorse a position that most directly reinforces our connection with others in our referent groups, which also strengthens our definition of self.

Some social media "friends" may be socially distant from you, but they represent your cultural community and are important keys as to what is relevant day to day. These social referents also affect an individual's preferred information sources—newspapers or Facebook posts, Fox News or public television. This confirmation bias—giving greater weight to information that supports pre-existing beliefs—is often measured as an individual attribute, though its roots are socially derived. Ideological filters are powerfully shaped by social group identification, so much so that "facts" become less important than ideological affiliation for polarized issues (Hindman 2009: 790), such as climate change (McCright and Dunlap 2011: 155).

As a social actor, an individual is in constant interaction with three levels: micro, meso, and macro (Norgaard 12). The micro level involves individual emotions and reactions to experiences and interactions with the meso and macro levels. The meso level concerns norms of social behavior resulting from conversations, others' feelings, and attention, which culturally shape (and constantly reinvent) what is considered "normal" to think about, talk about, and feel (Norgaard 210). Both the micro and meso are connected to the macro level of political economic relations (in the idling example, inexpensive gas, domination of auto transport, city architecture designed around cars, and energy ordinances and policies). Because the micro, meso, and macro levels are in constant interaction, the "causal" arrows go both directions, upstream and downstream.

Sociologist Kari Norgaard (210) explains the contradictions experienced in these intertwined interactions as they relate to climate change. The individual may hold feelings of concern, powerlessness, and guilt in the context of social pressure to fit in, but perceives no space for emotional or conversational expression. Another contradiction is between present-day behaviors that are antithetical to reduced emissions but are presented as "normal" in everyday life. The interactions among these levels have thus constructed idling as irrelevant: "everyone does it," the largely unknown ordinance is not enforced, and the connection is not made between individual action and the quality of the air "commons."

In this complex realm, it's not surprising that individual appeals often are not effective. As Norgaard concludes, the links between social structure and political economy shape individual sentiments and experience; the individual becomes part of the reproduction of the status quo. A "social fact" (whether idling or the larger car-dependent culture) is "the way in which individuals' seemingly rational actions are in fact merely reflections of permissible patterns of behavior within a particular social structure" (210). Environmental communicators are very familiar with the numerous contradictions between stated environmental values and political economy, and between knowledge, values, and everyday practice.

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A social norm is a “rule” of conduct that influences an individual’s behavior because “social others” and peers have made clear what is considered socially acceptable behavior. Social norms are “enforced” by perceived sanctions or ostracization, or by rewards from those social others. You don’t litter because you don’t want others to think you are the kind of person who would do that (Kinzig et al. 166). Social norms are powerful; they influence our attention, conversations, and actions. They may be guided by invisible social forces, but they can shape what we think and talk about and feel. Not surprisingly, people tend to underestimate the influence of social norms on their own behaviors (Cialdini 2007: 263).

Social norms can be either “descriptive” (a belief about what others are presently doing) or “injunctive” (a belief about what others should be doing or what most people approve of others doing). Idling a vehicle is an example of a descriptive social norm: people observe that this behavior is what others are frequently doing, and it essentially gives them social permission to behave likewise. Broadcasting an injunctive norm message to individuals telling them not to idle is a tough sell if “everyone does it.”

Because of the constant observation and interaction of the three levels, social norms can appear to change rapidly. Suddenly, an injunctive norm appears that you ought not to use a straw; earlier, you ought to bring your own shopping bag (Thomas et al. 2016). But norms rarely emerge spontaneously, rather they are a reflection of underlying material (or consumer) interests (Miyashita 2007: 99) and political economy struggles. Even if the state intervened and attempted to change the social norm of idling, the contradiction with the macro level would need to be addressed: gas is cheap, it’s a car-dominant culture, the ordinance is not enforced, and idling is not connected to anything larger (such as its contribution to common air pollution and a changing climate). If “ought not idle” emerged as a norm and individuals felt shamed for idling, but the contradictions with the macro level remained, over time the new injunctive norm likely would be subverted.

A large part of why social groups are important to you is the common values you share. You hold personal values that were molded through communal life and social interactions. These values might include what nature is good for, what is considered good and just in society, and what is the proper role of government. Such values and worldviews influence the uptake, understanding, interpretation, and response to environmental information at all levels.

Because of the importance of values, some scholars (Hoffman 31, Corner and Clarke 2017: 48) maintain that climate change should be communicated “values up” and not “science down.” This recognizes that the meso level is important, but a “values up” approach nevertheless must address the macro level of the embedded fossil fuel culture and the extensive economic and physical infrastructure that revolves around it. At least, as Lord (2014: 9) argues, a change in a society’s dominant energy source would be accompanied by a change in societal values.

When new information appears (whether a heat wave or tainted city water), you rely on the values of your social referents (and their preferred information sources) to filter the information through existing worldviews and cultural identity (Hoffman 16–17). Although it might seem that you evaluate a fact solely at the individual level, “facts” have a communal life and social attention (or inattention) is very much organized around them.

Journalism professor Candis Callison (2014) studied how climate change “comes to matter” (1, 29) for a broad range of social groups, including journalists, evangelicals, and socially responsible investors. She found that facts have a rich communal life, gaining meaning and relevance through social interaction. Social groups of all sizes can model a participation orientation (rather than a power or policy orientation) that relies on the strong personal ties of a collective and on the power of social norms. While we often turn to the government or

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environmental groups for environmental change, climate change needs the cross-cutting power of a wide variety of social groups and community efforts.

In her ethnography about a small Norwegian town during a very warm and snowless winter, Norgaard found that ignoring climate change occurred in response to social circumstances and was carried out through a process of social interaction, resulting in “socially organized denial” (6). Individuals distanced themselves from the information because of norms of emotion and conversation (things we just don’t talk about); climate change fell into that category. We know “about” it, but social and cultural cues tell it’s not something to pay attention to (or talk about). One cue may come from news media; even during record-setting heat waves across the country (and world), news stories rarely mention any connection to climate change.

All this suggests that environmental communicators and scholars need to fully consider the broader influences and interactions of the meso and macro with the individual to better understand how environmental sentiments and behaviors are formed, and how they can be affected. Rather than attempting to “reprogram” isolated individual behaviors, we need to take into consideration the social processes by which individuals internalize the reasons for so behaving (Corner and Clarke 80). The power and influence of any individual appears greater when acting and communicating within a social group or setting.

A holistic view of individuals and social change

Here is an anecdote to illustrate a holistic model of behavior change—a model influenced by social norms, a wide range of cultural institutions, the physical environment, and the political and economic systems. It is not an environmental example but one with which people are familiar.

In the late 1970s, the newsroom where I worked was a haze of cigarette smoke. We also smoked in conference rooms, on airplanes, and at restaurants. That sounds shocking and ridiculous now, but smoking was the descriptive norm then: it is what people did, everywhere.

So how and why did my (and other smokers’) attitudes and behaviors change? Many didn’t quit until smoking became highly inconvenient, expensive, and a shunned experience—all present in the larger social and economic system. After decades of concealment, studies of smoking’s health impacts were finally publicized. Soon laws severely restricted smoking in public places. Then, second-hand smoke impacts were revealed, making smoking more than just a personal harm to a smoker. Taxes on cigarettes skyrocketed. Only after all that came the injunctive norm: you should not smoke, nor expose others to it. There were also social events to stop smoking, like the American Cancer Society’s annual smoke-out.

This example shows us that significant social and cultural change is possible, that it required long-term effort, and that the change pressures must be holistic, complementary, and present in all levels: political, economic, in the physical environment, in social groups and by individuals. If barriers or constraints exist in one level, change is less supported at the individual level. This example makes apparent the weaknesses in the idling campaign, and generally in efforts to curb energy use.

The example also illustrates that change pressures often begin at the meso or macro level and filter down to individuals through interactions. In other cases, change efforts might begin at one level, or simultaneously among levels. This has been true in efforts by various U.S. cities to increase bicycle use. Addressing physical barriers (lack of dedicated bike lanes, bike

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parking, bike rentals, and safety) was crucial in creating a “bike culture” that motivated individual riders.

Another example of change at multiple levels involves pesticides, where meso-level homeowner associations and neighborhoods in Canada came together to ban pesticide use on lawns and parks. In one small town in Quebec, an influential doctor saw the health effects of pesticides in her patients and rallied townspeople until the town banned their use. Today, 170 towns in Canada—including Vancouver—have similar (macro-level) laws (Tyrell 2015). Some 80 percent of Canadians now live in places that restrict pesticide use. In the first year after Toronto’s ban, pesticide use dropped by a staggering 88 percent. Because of the tremendous normative pressure that supports using lawn chemicals, it’s ineffective to simply send individuals messages to stop using them. Action must take place at the meso level and above.

An important component of holistic behavior change across levels in a culture or community is the identification of common values that resonate. In the pesticide examples, “protecting children and health” was a value used to communicate and engage at all levels.

Climate change communication scholars have identified “communal values” that are consistently associated with positive engagement with climate change. In one study (Blackmore et al. 2014), benevolence (kindness) and universalism (the rights and welfare of all people) were key communal values across Europe as a whole. A study in the UK (Parkhill et al. 2013) asked participants to discuss the core values they wanted to be associated with positive energy-system change; they identified the protection of nature, fairness, respect for the autonomy of individuals, future well-being, efficiency, affordability, avoidance of waste, and long-term thinking. Such values can be meaningful across a wide range of social referent groups. Even value dimensions that seem juxtaposed—“conserving tradition” versus “openness to change”—can help spur conversation and work to find common ground among a wide variety of individuals and social groups.

The key point is that communal values should be prominent in all levels—social discussions, campaigns, and governance, instead of a sole focus on individual-directed “facts” and “science” whose meanings are greatly shaped by one’s social referent groups.

Considerations for environmental communication and research

It is clear that a communication and/or research focus on individuals as social actors in an extensive, highly interactive system is a highly nuanced and complex endeavor. It is easier to administer self-report surveys to volunteers on Amazon Mechanical Turk and quickly publish studies, although some have challenged the culture of speed in the academy (Berg and Seeber 2016).

But given our collective inability (in a wide variety of fields, not just communication) to effect significant change for numerous environmental problems, an expanded view of the communication landscape is timely and necessary. That view would consider individuals not as research end-points but as social actors in a complex system where all elements constantly interact and evolve—as does the communication.

Conceptualizing individuals as social actors requires examining them within their overlapping social referent groups where “facts” are given social meaning and where powerful norms are exerted. In considering all levels of a holistic system, scholars should identify how and where influence and communication flow, where decision pinch-points lie, how social norms close down (or open up) alternatives, how values and worldviews produce attention or

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inattention to information or practices, and how the political, economic, and physical environments support or constrain behavior change.

Such a reconceptualization might require different methods and longer-term research projects to meld micro, meso, and macro levels. The task could be made easier with interdisciplinary research teams drawn from a variety of fields, a practice which is gaining broader acceptance in universities and from some funding entities.

Several bits of good news accompany this reconceptualization. First, individuals are not solely to blame for eschewing actions communicated to them, and the burden of change does not (and should not) lie entirely in their laps. When working within social groups, individuals are less isolated and more supported and powerful.

An expanded notion of the individual also expands avenues for research. One possibility is the dialogue and conversation forums and organizations that are gaining ground. Although dialogue groups are studied by interpersonal communication scholars (Ganesh and Zoller 2012) few environmental communication scholars have examined them. Citizen summits, civic expression groups, conversation cafes, and “living room conversations” bring varied individuals to talk about a particular topic or concern, often aided by trained facilitators. Following a set of guidelines or agreements, participants listen to understand and not to influence; they speak for themselves and from their own experience, and find common ground. For many, it is a chance to talk personally about topics that are largely encountered only at the political level.

In the UK, participatory peer-to-peer dialogues are building a sense of broad “citizenship” around climate change, which recognizes responsibilities rather than solely individual rights (Corner and Clarke 83). Environmental citizenship can foster a sense of fairness and justice between humans and increase participation in local community organizations and decision-making (Dobson 2010). As Corner and Clarke conclude, individual behaviors matter most as expressions of climate citizenship, rather than as ends in themselves (85).

Note

- 1 Social desirability response is the tendency to respond to a question in a way that puts oneself in a socially favorable light. For questions about the environment, that could mean reporting that you drive less than you do or value biodiversity more than you do, in order to align with perceived social norms and values regarding those topics.

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