

Structural vs. Individual Change Beliefs: Top-Down or Bottom-Up Change

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Introduction

Climate change is the result of both individual & collective actions. Proposed solutions to mitigate its impacts include individual & structural change. While experts have beliefs about the efficacy of such “bottom-up” (individual focused) versus “top-down” (systems focused) approaches, others hold their own beliefs on how this issue should be tackled & what the correct actions to take towards a sustainable future are. These sorts of beliefs may be related to attributions of blame and responsibility (Guckian et al. 2018, Stern, 2000) and are important to understand as they may impact policy support & collective action.

Methods

Across three samples, participants were asked to rate how much they agreed (Likert scale) with two statements.

The key issue in addressing climate change is...

...getting individuals to change their lifestyle choices

...changing the laws and operation of society and the economy

Study 1: 505 participants were recruited from MTurk to get a general population measure of these beliefs.

Study 2: 30 student environmental activists were recruited to examine these beliefs among activists.

Study 3: 456 participants were recruited through an intercept survey on a large university campus.

Attributions of Blame

In Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked how much different entities were to blame for climate change. Attributions of blame for climate change were related to their beliefs in top-down vs. bottom-up solutions.

	Study 1		Study 2	
	BU <i>b</i> (SE)	TD <i>b</i> (SE)	BU <i>b</i> (SE)	TD <i>b</i> (SE)
Blame Individuals	0.60 (0.05) ^{***}	0.00 (0.05)	0.31 (0.06) ^{***}	0.07 (0.09)
Blame Corporations	0.06 (0.04)	0.51 (0.05) ^{***}	0.02 (0.06)	0.34 (0.09) ^{***}

Environmental Group Focus and Membership

Participants were asked where environmental groups should focus their attention. Bottom-up beliefs predicted wanting groups to change behavior while top-down beliefs predict a focus on changing society (in Study 3).

	Study 2		Study 3	
	BU <i>b</i> (SE)	TD <i>b</i> (SE)	BU <i>b</i> (SE)	TD <i>b</i> (SE)
Increase skills of community members	0.37 (0.12) ^{**}	-0.04 (0.19)	0.31 (0.04) ^{***}	0.23 (0.04) ^{***}
Change way community/society operates	-0.21 (0.15)	0.09 (0.23)	0.05 (0.03)	0.52 (0.04) ^{***}

Participants in Study 3 also listed any groups they were a member of. Endorsement of top-down beliefs predicted membership in student environmental groups ($b = 0.85$, $SE = 0.29$, $p = .003$), while bottom-up beliefs did not ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .63$).

Discussion

As activism around climate change grows and new policies and actions are debated, it's important to understand how beliefs about the issue and its proposed solutions may impact future actions and support. Assessing these beliefs about how best to address climate change reveals important differences between individuals that may have real-world implications.

Although any action to combat climate change will likely take both fundamental systemic as well as individual level change (Ostrom, 2010), individuals hold different preferences for where to focus action. We found that where people place blame for climate change impacts their beliefs on where change needs to happen to address these issues, and these beliefs in turn predict attitudes about where environmental groups should focus their attention.

Work Cited and Affiliations

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