

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Professor Adrian Davis
Date: 25th August 2022
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No.58: Pluralistic Ignorance

Top line: To create serious movement on climate change, we must dispel the myth of indifference. Pluralistic ignorance is often a barrier to discussions. This barrier can be removed by informing those with inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions that a majority do share their concerns.

Despite the importance of public communication about climate change, most citizens rarely discuss the topic. In studies, researchers have found that inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions (i.e. pluralistic ignorance) contributes to self-silencing among those concerned about climate change. This is a phenomenon commonly found across many areas of public policy e.g. support for racial segregation in the 1970s (most white Americans supported desegregation but believed that most others supported segregation); norms of alcohol consumption (university students believing that norms of alcohol consumption were excessive but perceived that most others supported them). In the UK, pluralistic ignorance exists around majority support for 20mph speed limits in communities. Despite representative sample surveys showing 65-70% majority support for 20mph in local communities – when asked whether most people in the country support 20 mph limits researchers found a larger percentage of adults disagreed than agreed that there was support with a resulting consequent 'spiral of silence'.¹

Self-silencing may be a form of impression management. Individuals desire to be viewed in a positive light and sharing an unpopular opinion could result in others perceiving them negatively. The desire to avoid being disliked has also been well established as a motive for self-silencing when one is a target of discrimination and prejudice. Researchers have thus proposed that people self-silence because of fear of isolation.²

Research finds those who are aware of others' concern about climate change report greater willingness to discuss the issue than those with inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions. However, the effects of pluralistic ignorance is promoting public silence on the socially relevant topic of climate change.³ Among students, survey respondents who did not themselves doubt climate change were less willing to discuss the topic when they inaccurately believed fellow students would not share their opinion than when they accurately perceived they were in the majority. The reason individuals are more willing to discuss climate change when they perceive that others agree is because they expected to be respected more (i.e., appear more competent). In the US, while 66–80% Americans support these policies, Americans estimate the prevalence to only be between 37–43% on average.⁴

Pluralistic ignorance leads to self-silencing because perceptions that others do not share one's opinion are associated with expecting to be perceived as less competent in a conversation. One way to promote discussion is to correct pluralistic ignorance, informing those with inaccurate perceptions of others' opinions that a majority do share their concerns.

¹ Tapp, A. et al, 2016 Vicious or virtuous circles? Exploring the vulnerability of drivers to break low urban speed limits, *Transportation Research Part A*, 91: 195-212.

² Holioen, D., Fiske, S. 2013 Downplaying positive impressions: compensation between warmth and competence in impression management, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(1): 33-41.

³ Geiger, N., Swim, J. 2016 Climate of silence: Pluralistic ignorance as a barrier to climate change discussion, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 47, 79-90.

⁴ Sparkman, G., Geiger, N. & Weber, E.U. 2022 Americans experience a false social reality by underestimating popular climate policy support by nearly half. *Nat Commun* 13, 4779. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-32412-y>