

2019 IGS GLOBAL  
SCHOLAR PRIZE  
WINNING ESSAY



# CLIMATE CHANGE

REWARDING AN OUTSTANDING ESSAY  
ADDRESSING ISSUES OF GLOBAL  
COMPLEXITY AND SIGNIFICANCE



INTERNATIONAL  
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# CLIMATE CHANGE


According to a report conducted by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), climate change could be irreversible by 2030. Without change, the world's coral reefs could be completely eradicated, and we could see a drastic increase in flooding, extreme heat, drought and poverty. Despite this evidence, action in response to climate change remains very slow.

Many people are focusing on the impact of climate change – the “what”. Fewer people are talking about the “why” – why people around the world are not changing their behaviour in response to climate change quickly enough. This essay looks at three psychological constructs which may explain some of the reasons people are not taking action to reduce the global ramifications of climate change.

Many individuals find it difficult to respond to climate change due to the diffusion of responsibility across the billions of people in the world. This effect is known as the bystander effect. The bystander effect is a claim that individuals are less likely to offer help to victims when other people are present; the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that one of them will help. If you replace the word “victim” with “earth” and the

“other people present” as “the earth’s population” you can see the bystander effect in action. The psychologist responsible for the concept of the bystander effect, Bibb Latané, discusses the diffusion of responsibility among multiple bystanders, leading individuals to believe someone else will step forward to intervene. Greg Jericho highlighted this principle in an article discussing governments of powerful countries, such as Japan, waiting for another to act. Latané theorised that the effect is likely also bolstered by bystanders believing others are more qualified to help. Many individuals believe their intervention will be a waste of time and that climate activists such as Greta Thunberg have more influence.

The question individuals need to ask themselves is, “am I a symptom of the bystander effect?”



“We have a single mission: to protect and hand on the planet to the next generation”.

The second construct that may stop individuals acting to reduce the ramifications of climate change is known as the “circle of concern and circle of influence”.

A circle of concern encompasses the wide range of concerns individuals have, about topics such as the impact of climate change. The challenge of this circle is that many concerns are beyond what we can influence. However, a circle of influence encompasses those concerns we can do something about. Ever since climate change was recognised, the circle of concern for people has grown significantly.

Focusing on overwhelming climate concerns often means individuals ignore the simple things they could influence. In the book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey discusses how the two circles affect how people deal with problems. When individuals think of climate change, they often focus on their circle of concern and feel like they are helpless to do anything. Individuals forget to identify actions such as recycling, which could reduce their circle of concern. This cycle contributes to climate inaction because people do not focus on what they can influence.

Environmental leaders such as Steve Westlake found that many people become consumed with the belief that their individual actions will have no effect on ending climate change but don't stop to consider the impact of thousands of people performing simple actions, like using less water. Every individual needs to identify their circle of influence, to become more proactive in climate change prevention.

The third psychological barrier that prevents action on climate change is confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information that confirms one's beliefs. This often leads people to avoid, dismiss, ignore or forget information.

Confirmation bias can often downplay the severity and problems associated with climate change. For example, the fact that people are primarily responsible for climate change is possibly humankind's greatest shame. It would be preferable if there were other reasons. This is why, when information supporting other causes of climate change is presented, some individuals will favour it. Confirmation bias can also lead individuals to become more likely to believe false or half-truths.

For instance, particular studies on climate change state that the naturally occurring chemical, carbon dioxide is to blame for climate change. The study mentions that the effect is only minor but certain individuals will choose to instantly believe this statement and neglect to double-check the information. Confirmation bias can often lead people to believe that climate change does not pose a large threat or exist at all. This prevents individuals from reducing their damaging actions.

It is worth recalling the words of the President of France François Hollande when signing the Paris agreement

in 2016: “We have a single mission: to protect and hand on the planet to the next generation.”

How can this objective be achieved, if people don't change their behaviour with regards to climate change?

This essay has highlighted some reasons why people are not doing so and the importance of everyone considering whether they are a victim of the bystander effect, suffering from confirmation bias, or focusing on their circle of concern, rather than their circle of influence. If we can do this, we can all help reduce the global ramifications of climate change.



#### RUBY DRAGICEVIC

I am extremely honoured and happy to receive this award, as I am very passionate about this topic. The severe effects of climate change and the reasons that stop people taking action in response to climate change has always been a point of interest for me. I am always surprised by the lack of climate action by many individuals. Lots of people enjoy

participating in climate strikes but at the same time don't do simple things like recycling and limiting their water usage. It has been really eye-opening to learn about psychological constructs which control my and other people's daily lives and it has changed the way I think about climate change.

