

**Building Diverse Climate Coalitions: The Pitfalls and Promise of Equity- and Identity-
Based Messaging**

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Abstract

In response to the largest climate demonstrations in history and growing recognition of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on disadvantaged communities, environmental organizations are increasingly looking to diversify their memberships and enhance public outreach. In this review, we consider unique challenges inherent in building racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse climate coalitions and highlight three often implicit assumptions that may undermine the effectiveness of equity- and identity-based climate communications and public outreach efforts: (a) that pro-diversity messaging is viewed as inclusive by both racial and ethnic majority and minority groups; (b) that making specific identity groups salient will engage targeted individuals; and (c) that enhancing the salience of climate-related inequities bolsters public support for efforts to reduce those inequities. Drawing from psychological research and theory as well as real-world examples, we discuss problems with each of these assumptions, highlight current knowledge gaps, and offer practical recommendations for more effectively tailoring communications to broaden public engagement across differences.

Keywords: climate change, collective action, communication, diversity, social identity

Significance:

The present review suggests that many appeals designed to promote diversity and broaden public engagement may in fact impede the formation and growth of racially and socioeconomically diverse climate coalitions. We highlight three tacit assumptions often present in equity- and identity-based organizational communications that may undermine their effectiveness. We offer practical recommendations for strengthening inclusive messaging and enhancing public support for equity-based climate policies and initiatives.

Building Diverse Climate Coalitions: The Pitfalls and Promise of Equity- and Identity-Based Messaging

On September 20th, 2019, millions of people around the world participated in the Global Climate Strike—the largest and most diverse climate protests in history—to demand urgent action to combat climate change and address its unequal effects (Laville & Watts, 2019). Within the United States, climate policies that center equity, justice, and the inclusion of marginalized and disproportionately affected communities in decision-making, such as the Green New Deal, New York's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, and the Biden Administration's Justice40 initiative, have seen unprecedented growth at both state and federal levels as well as in international policymaking (GND Group, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Young et al., 2021). Nevertheless, recent analyses of demographic trends as well as organizational transparency initiatives from Green 2.0, a campaign to increase racial and ethnic diversity within the environmental movement, reveal a persistent lack of diversity in many of the world's largest and most influential environmental organizations that shape domestic and international climate policies and priorities (see Pearson & Schuldt, 2018). For instance, despite representing nearly 40% of the U.S. population and experiencing disproportionate effects of climate change, people of color make up, on average, less than 30% of full-time staff within U.S. nongovernmental environmental organizations (Green 2.0, 2021). Racial and ethnic disparities have similarly been documented in federal agencies that oversee U.S. climate and energy policies, as well as within academia, where disparities in earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences have remained largely unchanged since the 1970s (Bernard & Cooperdock, 2018; Government Accountability Office, 2021).

These disparities have spurred both governmental and nongovernmental organizations to bolster efforts to broaden public engagement, with a particular focus on including historically marginalized and underrepresented groups in climate-related decision making (Blue & Davidson, 2020; Pearson et al., 2021; Reed, 2021). In this review, we take stock of these efforts and recent empirical findings within psychology to consider how and when the use of identity- and equity-based appeals (e.g., messages that make race or class-based group memberships or inequities salient) might facilitate or hinder the formation and maintenance of racially and socioeconomically diverse climate coalitions. Although we recognize that some organizations may not have coalition-building as a goal, we focus our review on psychological research that may offer insights for organizations that seek to diversify their memberships, expand access to organizational initiatives, and/or center racial or economic equity as an explicit focus of their communications. We also limit the scope of our review to primarily considering organizational initiatives focusing on race, ethnicity, and social class within the United States but note the importance of future work to consider the generalizability of our recommendations and assumptions for communications beyond the U.S. and for other identity groups, including those with opinion-based (e.g., environmentalists), practice-based (e.g., veganism), and intersecting identities.

Diversity science utilizes behavioral science methodologies to examine how people and organizations create, interpret, and maintain group differences, as well as the social and societal consequences of these distinctions (Plaut, 2011). Thus, a diversity science approach can help to illuminate psychological factors that can promote and impede collective action and coalition-building, including around the issue of climate change. Climate engagement has been defined as “a personal state of connection with the issue of climate change, in contrast to engagement solely as a process of public participation in policy making” (Lorenzoni et al., 2007, p. 446). This state

may inspire individual or collective behavior within the public or private sphere. It can also be conceptualized as a process in which groups perform actions that engage the interests and concerns of a particular audience about climate change or efforts to address it.

Climate communication scholarship has long emphasized the need to tailor messaging (e.g., audience segmentation) to reach different segments of the public, as well as the benefits and drawbacks to doing so (see Bostrom et al., 2013; and Moser, 2016). To date, climate communication scholarship on collective action has focused extensively on partisan identity processes, with less attention paid to nonpartisan factors that may also influence public engagement (Pearson & Schuldt, 2018). Understanding factors that shape coalition-building among nonpartisan groups, such as among various racial and ethnic groups, Indigenous communities, and those with different social and economic resources, is particularly important as climate change not only disproportionately impacts low-income communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color but also exacerbates societal inequities and divisions in ways that may make future climate cooperation and collective action more difficult (Difffenbaugh & Burke, 2019; EPA, 2021; Green & Healy, 2022). Furthermore, engaging underrepresented groups can substantially inform climate resilience through the incorporation of local knowledge and cultural practices. For instance, Indigenous communities hold ecological knowledge and use cultural practices developed from a long history of engaging with their natural surroundings that can inform resource-use, land management, and resiliency policies and practices essential to climate adaptation and mitigation (Ford et al., 2020).

In this review, we draw from psychological research on social identity and collective action to explore both the promise and pitfalls of identity- and equity-based organizational communications designed to foster and support the growth of racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse climate coalitions. We first explore unique communication challenges

that climate change poses for cross-group coalition-building, and then consider three common assumptions that may limit the effectiveness of some organizational diversity- and equity-focused appeals. We examine how communications that fail to consider these assumptions may alienate members of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups (terms we use to encompass social groups regardless of their numerical representation who are economically and/or socially [dis]advantaged) and fuel social divisions, two major impediments to building diverse coalitions and sustaining intergroup cooperation needed to address the collective problems posed by climate change. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that social divisions, in some cases, may also *galvanize* social movements; thus, communication strategies that aim to bridge divisions may not always be optimal for promoting social change (see Brulle, 2010). We conclude with practical recommendations for designing more effective communications.

The Challenge of Climate Communication in Unequal Societies

Climate change poses several distinct practical challenges for organizations in diverse and unequal societies such as the United States. For instance, owing to a legacy of segregation, discriminatory policies, and other structural inequities, those least responsible for causing climate change, such as communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-income communities, are disproportionately impacted by it and often lack critical resources and political capacity to address it, which can fuel mistrust (Pearson et al., 2021; Tessum et al., 2019). Moreover, inequities in the distribution of the opportunities and benefits afforded by climate solutions may further hinder cooperation and exacerbate mistrust.

Unique temporal and spatial scales of climate change and a lack of public awareness of its differential impacts present additional challenges for climate communication and public outreach. Temporal and spatial distancing, whereby the impacts of climate change are viewed as occurring in the future and in geographically distant locations, may lead individuals to remain

complacent, justify the status quo, or shift responsibility of mitigation to other groups, nations, or generations (see Pearson et al., 2021). Moreover, surveys suggest that public awareness of the disparate impacts of climate change within nations is remarkably poor. In a 2019 survey of young U.S. adults aged 18–35, just 27% of respondents, including only one in three Black and Latino respondents, reported that climate change will disproportionately affect people of color (NORC Gen- Forward, 2019; see also Bugden, 2020).

Differing motivations of racial–ethnic minority and majority and socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged groups may also pose obstacles for cross-group coalition-building. Communications that emphasize commonalities between groups tend to appeal to Whites, whereas communications that focus on subgroup identities (i.e., an identity specific to a subset of people, such as a racial or ethnic identity within a broader community) and highlight group disparities tend to appeal more to people of color (for a review, see Dovidio et al., 2016). Further complicating this tension, advantaged and disadvantaged groups may prefer different group representations, with advantaged groups showing a preference for assimilation and a common identity and disadvantaged groups preferring a dual identity or multicultural representation in which both subgroup identities (e.g., racial or ethnic group) and commonalities between groups are recognized and valued (Dovidio et al., 2000). Communications that emphasize only commonalities may fail to recognize inequities or valued aspects of subgroup identities and may therefore be met with resistance by racial and ethnic minority group members (Jetten et al., 2004). Thus, recognizing differing and sometimes conflicting motivations of various groups is critical for designing effective communications to foster intergroup cooperation.

Social Psychological and Structural Obstacles to Coalition-Building

Stereotypes and misperceptions about the perspectives and concerns of people of color and socio- economically disadvantaged groups may also pose problems for environmental organizations seeking to diversify or broaden public outreach (Lewis et al., 2021). Within the United States, communities of color have been excluded from many aspects of mainstream environmentalism due to persistent barriers inhibiting access to parks and outdoor recreational spaces, as well as a history of exclusion among mainstream environmental organizations (Davis, 2019; Taylor, 2014). Inequities in access to resources (e.g., time, money) may also drive different expressions of environmentalism, limiting some resource-intensive forms of participation, such as charitable giving or volunteerism, among some socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (see Pearson & Schuldt, 2018). Nevertheless, opinion polls reveal strong support for a wide range of environmental protections (e.g., regulating carbon emissions) among communities of color in the United States (Ballew et al., 2020; Pearson et al., 2017) and a greater willingness to personally engage in civil disobedience and other forms of activism to address climate change, relative to U.S. Whites (Ballew et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2022). Similar heightened environmental concerns are reflected among elected officials, with Hispanic and African American members of Congress more likely than White members to vote pro-environmentally (Ard & Mohai, 2011).

At the same time, despite their disproportionate vulnerability, low-income communities and communities of color in the United States are misperceived as less concerned about the environment than White and more affluent communities by a large segment of the U.S. public—a misperception that tracks with pervasive stereotypes of environmentalists as White, middle-class, and highly educated (Pearson et al., 2018). To the extent members of advocacy organizations endorse similar views, these misperceptions may influence which groups' perspectives get prioritized, as well as guide out- reach that has historically overlooked

communities of color. Indeed, surveys have found that nearly 20% of executives of U.S. environmental NGOs and more than 60% of search firm representatives recruited by these organizations to facilitate hiring endorse the belief that a lack of interest among job seekers of color contributes to low diversity in environmental organizations—a perception not reflected in surveys of environmental majors and young professionals (Beasley, 2016; see Taylor, 2018).

Failing to recognize the differing environmental perspectives of more vulnerable populations (i.e., lack of *recognition justice*; Blue & Davidson, 2020) may further erode trust necessary for collective action (Lewis et al., 2021). For instance, disproportionate exposure to a wide range of environmental hazards, and the social and structural conditions that fuel and magnify them, can drive fundamentally different understandings of environmental issues. Song et al. (2020) found that U.S. Blacks, Latinos, and lower-income individuals are more likely than White and higher-income individuals to construe social factors that amplify environmental harm, like racism and poverty, as “environmental” issues. These divergent perceptions mirror a deep-rooted rift in environmental advocacy within the United States, where a historical focus on issues such as nature conservation among mainstream environmental organizations has often conflicted with a focus within the environmental justice movement on social and environmental conditions that threaten human populations (Mohai et al., 2009).

Theoretical Perspectives

Given the challenges inherent in climate communications, how might organizations appeal to different demographics without exacerbating racial, ethnic, and class divisions? Social identity approaches offer a framework for considering how coalitions can be formed and maintained across differences. Moreover, interventions that capitalize on social identity processes have been shown to be effective at motivating cooperation in resource dilemmas, as

well as collective action in a wide range of real-world contexts (Green, 2021; Klavina & Van Zomeren, 2020; Mackay et al., 2021).

According to the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; Van Zomeren et al., 2008), people participate in collective action when they identify with a group mobilizing action, when they experience emotional reactions, such as anger at perceived injustice, and when they believe that their group's efforts can be effective. Moral convictions may also serve as an important precursor to group-based moral emotions like guilt, as well as social identification, which, in turn, predict collective action (see Bamberg et al., 2018). For many, collective action around climate change may also stem from shared beliefs or strongly held opinions about who is responsible for addressing climate change or for preferred climate solutions. Bongiorno et al. (2016) propose three elements as important to collective action stemming from such *opinion-based* groups: group members (a) work to reach consensus on the action they should take (action consensus), (b) believe that their actions will produce the intended change (action efficacy), and (c) believe their view deserves public expression (action voice).

Intergroup cooperation may also require transformations in how intergroup boundaries are perceived (Ferguson et al., 2019). Appealing to superordinate identities such as a common human identity has been shown to promote prosocial behaviors and pro-environmental intentions and has been suggested as a path toward global climate justice by promoting environmental justice beliefs that consider all people (Reese, 2016). Moreover, research suggests that when facing common threats, such as environmental injustice, making a person of color (POC) identity salient—a superordinate category encompassing different racial and ethnic minority groups—may motivate its members to collectively act. In a large nationally representative survey of U.S. Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans, higher levels of POC identity predicted stronger anger and feelings of collective efficacy to address harms specific to

their communities, which predicted a willingness to personally confront environmental injustice (Chin et al., 2022). Moreover, these effects were stronger among those who viewed themselves as more prototypical of a POC identity. Similarly, salient discrimination against one's own racial group can evoke a common disadvantaged group identity that can increase felt connection between different racial and ethnic minority groups (Craig & Richeson, 2012).

Nevertheless, uniting disparate groups under a common identity does not necessarily require each group to relinquish their initial group identities. Members can hold a “dual identity” whereby they acknowledge themselves as members of different subgroups working together within a common ingroup (see Dovidio et al., 2016). Recognizing subgroup identities enables intergroup cooperation by minimizing threats to subgroup identities and fostering appreciation for their distinct contributions.

Intragroup factors can also impact the extent to which one identifies with a group invested in a cause. Identity based motivation (IBM) theory posits that people act in accordance with the perceived norms of their ingroup: when behaviors are viewed as normative (i.e., actions “people like me” take), people are more likely to engage with social causes (Oyserman et al., 2007). However, *which* identity is salient and how it influences behavior depends on the context (Lewis & Oyserman, 2016). Owing to a history of exclusion, people of color in the United States may perceive behaviors normative to White middle-class America as counter to those of their ingroup (Oyserman et al., 2007). For instance, Oyserman et al. (2007) found that priming race-ethnicity increased health fatalism among students of color in the United States who perceived unhealthy behaviors, such as eating fast food, as typical of their ingroup. These findings explain why some racial-ethnic minorities and members of lower-income groups may distance themselves from environmental organizations or initiatives—which may be viewed as

stereotypically White and middle class—despite being among those *most* concerned about the environment (Pearson et al., 2018).

The central role of identity in each of these models highlights the importance of considering how organizational messaging may inhibit or facilitate identification with climate coalitions. Whether people respond to perceived injustice with collective action may be influenced by the perceived norms and goals of the group with which they identify. Likewise, whereas many collective action models suggest how social identification may increase efficacy, IBM theory suggests that it can also reduce efficacy when the behaviors in question are seen as counter to ingroup norms. Next, we explore how organizational messaging that fails to consider these processes may be ineffective or backfire.

Three Problematic Assumptions

Drawing from research within psychology, communication, and organizational behavior, below, we highlight three common assumptions often implicit in many organizational diversity and equity initiatives that may compromise the effectiveness of communications designed to appeal to racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse audiences, as well as alternative message frames that practitioners might consider to mitigate potential unintended negative effects (see Table 1).

Problematic Assumption 1: Pro-diversity messaging is viewed as equitable and inclusive by both racial-ethnic majority and minority groups. Over the past decade, prominent environmental organizations like the Sierra Club have expanded their efforts to increase the diversity and inclusion of staff and members. However, organizations may face subtle challenges resulting from the potential of organizational diversity messaging to be ineffective or even backfire, producing effects opposite of those intended (see Dover et al., 2020; and Leslie, 2018). For the purposes of this review, consistent with Leslie (2018), we define a

diversity initiative as one or more procedures that are implemented by a group or organization to better the experience and outcomes of a disadvantaged group, including greater representation and inclusion in decision making, reduced inequity in harms, and/or enhanced access to benefits, such as jobs or resources. Diversity initiatives may fail to achieve these outcomes by communicating (intentionally or unintentionally) implicit messages about fairness, inclusion, or competence (Dover et al., 2020).

First, signaling fairness goals, paradoxically, has the potential to reduce people's sensitivity to unfairness experienced by racial-ethnic minority groups. For instance, Whites view the mere presence of diversity initiatives, such as diversity awards or diversity training, as indicating that an organization is more procedurally fair for racial-ethnic minorities and women than organizations without such initiatives (Kaiser et al., 2013). This illusion can consequently result in Whites viewing discrimination claims as less valid, even when provided with evidence of unfair treatment of these groups in promotion, hiring, and wage decisions. Prodiversity messages may also be perceived by members of the racial-ethnic majority group as unfair to their group, reducing cooperation among these individuals (Dover et al., 2020).

Second, even well-intentioned efforts to signal inclusion can fuel mistrust among racial-ethnic minorities and historically excluded groups if they produce false promises. When an organization fails to conform to what is portrayed in its diversity materials, it can be perceived as violating a "psychological contract" (McKay & Avery, 2005). Third, prodiversity messaging may inadvertently signal that racial or ethnic minority or socioeconomically disadvantaged groups need help to succeed or that members of these groups were selected for a particular role because of their identity rather than their competence or expertise (Dover et al., 2020). In one study, for instance, Latinos viewed the qualifications of an extremely qualified Latino candidate less favorably in the presence of a diversity rationale (vs. no rationale; Espino-Pérez et al., 2018).

One solution, suggested by Dover et al. (2020), is to emphasize the importance of procedural fairness as a goal of diversity initiatives. Another strategy is to frame diversity initiatives broadly so that diversity encompasses not only attributes like race-ethnicity, gender, or age, but also other personal attributes, like educational background, or relevant experience (Dover et al., 2020). However, Dover et al. (2020) note that this approach may backfire by signaling symbolic rather than practical efforts to achieve diversity, which may undermine perceptions of the authenticity of the organization's aims.

Research suggests that highlighting superficial commonalities without acknowledging the value of members' subgroup identities (e.g., racial or ethnic identity) can also be problematic. Use of vague diversity messages or generic imagery may be perceived as disingenuous for merely portraying diversity, rather than conveying a genuine institutional commitment to equity and inclusion. Moreover, such superficial commonality cues can lead members of the racial-ethnic majority or advantaged group to avoid addressing inequities (Dovidio et al., 2016). For instance, in a study by Saguy and colleagues (2009), commonality-focused contact (vs. difference-focused contact) resulted in more positive intergroup attitudes, but reduced attention to group-based inequality among both advantaged and disadvantaged group members.

Given the historical exclusion of people of color in many mainstream environmental organizations and professions, evidence-based cues that an organization not only values diversity but is committed to enhancing opportunities for marginalized groups may be critical to overcoming perceptions of superficial inclusion. For instance, Wilton and colleagues (2020) compared the effect of communications that *show* an organization's diversity, such as charts showing diversity in leadership (i.e., evidence-based diversity cues), and cues that *tell* about the organization's inclusive values, such as messages in recruitment materials (i.e., expressed diversity cues). They found that evidence-based, but not expressed cues, reduced perceptions of

“diversity dishonesty”—a perception that an organization is misleading in its diversity claims—among Black respondents, which, in turn, lessened concerns about fitting in. These findings suggest that organizations lacking diversity might focus on other aspects of an organization that are desirable rather than potentially misrepresenting their diversity (McKay & Avery, 2005).

Problematic Assumption 2: Making specific identity groups salient will engage members of these groups. Another common assumption for identity and equity-based communication campaigns is that they promote agency and a sense of representation among historically marginalized groups. Research suggests that counterstereotypic messaging that highlights pro-environmental norms among racial, ethnic, and class-based ingroups, such as Green 2.0's “Leadership at Work” initiative, which highlights leaders of color within the environmental field, may show promise for enhancing environmental engagement among traditionally underrepresented groups (Pearson et al., 2018). Nevertheless, social psychological research suggests that targeted messaging to reach specific marginalized groups can in some cases reduce engagement among these individuals.

As previously noted, Pearson et al. (2018) found that both White and racial-ethnic minority respondents in a U.S. nationally representative survey associated the term “environmentalist” with being White, middle-class, and highly educated. Environmental appeals may, thus, inadvertently activate stereotypes that reinforce notions of exclusivity. Moreover, given the persistent lack of representation of communities of color within mainstream environmental organizations, messages highlighting organizational diversity efforts may risk exacerbating stereotypic beliefs that racial-ethnic minorities lack concern for the environment through a process of subtyping. In this process, stereotypes can remain unchanged in the face of contradictory evidence when counterstereotypic individuals are perceived as highly atypical

(Park et al., 2001). Thus, interventions that seek to reduce these stereotypes may require repeated or sustained counterstereotype exposure over time.

Even if diversity messages avoid activating stereotypes, their effectiveness may depend on the level of identification one feels toward a given reference group. For example, in a series of studies, African Americans who weakly (vs. strongly) identified with their racial group felt more anxiety and inauthenticity when thinking about interviewing at a company with a multicultural (vs. colorblind) orientation that encouraged employees to embrace racial, ethnic, and cultural differences (vs. similarities) and were evaluated more negatively in a mock job interview (Kirby & Kaiser, 2021). Beyond racial or ethnic identification, other individual differences may also moderate the effectiveness of messaging aiming to build diverse climate coalitions, such as the strength of one's biospheric values (McGuicken & Palomo-Vélez, 2021).

As Brulle (2010, p. 91) and others have noted, “to mobilize broad-based support for social change, citizens cannot be treated as mere objects for manipulation. Rather, they should be treated as citizens involved in a mutual dialog...this calls for a reorientation of environmental communication from identity campaigns to civic engagement.” When people are not only provided with information conveying risk but are also included in decision making that addresses it, they are more likely to engage in collective action than when simply encouraged to support policies developed by others (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009).

Analytic deliberation, a decision process that integrates scientific analysis and community deliberation, is one strategy that can aid the development of communications in ways that enhance, rather than impede, civic engagement (Burgess et al., 2007; see also Arvai & Gregory, 2020, and Romsdahl, 2020). This method has been used for environmental risk management and policy development, including environmental justice. For instance, Phadke et al. (2015) recruited members from community-based organizations in Saint Paul, Minnesota,

including affluent neighborhoods, as well as African American, Latino, and immigrant communities often absent from city planning, to contribute to the City's climate adaptation plan by helping to assess climate vulnerabilities and prioritize public investments. Structured deliberations identified points of consensus in priorities, as well as local landmarks to communicate the personal relevance of climate adaptation.

Another increasingly popular strategy to broaden civic engagement and decision making around climate change is the use of citizen assemblies—forums comprising a diverse and representative subset of a community convened to discuss and develop policy recommendations (Elstub et al., 2021). This type of “mini public” has been successfully used in various countries such as the United Kingdom and France, and is gaining interest in the United States, with the state of Washington having held the first assembly in the country in early 2021 (Godwin, 2021).

Using a more focused inclusion approach also requires careful attention to the messenger and organizational leadership. Research suggests teams with diverse leadership, rather than mostly advantaged group leaders, may often be more effective in mobilizing disadvantaged groups, even when the group's explicit objective is to address inequality. Iyer and Achia (2020) found that when presented with information about a nonprofit organization that was seeking to address racial inequality, racial minority respondents viewed the leadership team more negatively and perceived their aims as less tractable when the leadership was majority White (vs. more racially diverse). At the same time, communities of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are also stereotyped as more committed to social justice than others, which may fuel complacency and disengagement from equity-oriented initiatives by advantaged groups (Saguy et al., 2020). These findings imply both racial-ethnic majority and minority representation in communications may be critical for building durable and effective cross-group coalitions, and particularly when such coalitions have equity as an explicit focus.

One highly successful real-world example of a coalition that has effectively formed a diverse leadership team to mobilize and support disadvantaged communities is North Bay Jobs With Justice. This grassroots coalition based in Sonoma, California, has engaged a base of hundreds of farmworkers in their 5 for Farmworkers in Fires campaign by training farmworkers to be organizers in their local communities and including them as members on their leadership committee (North Bay Jobs with Justice, 2022).

Problematic Assumption 3: Conveying climate-related inequity enhances support for efforts to reduce inequity among both advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Practitioners may often believe in the power of information – that “facts speak for themselves” – to mobilize people to address disparities in domains like public health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). However, research suggests that communicating about social disparities can lead people to justify systems that produce them. For instance, Whites show greater support for policies that enable racial disparities in incarceration (e.g., California’s three-strikes law) and the death penalty after learning about these disparities (see Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). Similarly, Harell and Lieberman (2021) found that presenting information about racial disparities in COVID-19 mortality resulted in lower levels of support for public health measures among Whites with more negative racial attitudes compared to those with more favorable attitudes.

Exposure to information about racial disparities may produce similarly maladaptive responses among racial-ethnic minority groups. For example, prior studies have shown that African Americans who read about Black–White cancer disparities felt more negative emotions and expressed lower intentions to get a future cancer screening than those who read an article emphasizing impact or progress (Nicholson et al., 2008). Parallel findings have been found for communicating racial differences in sexually transmitted disease risk, with reactions of shock,

sadness, fear, and mistrust being common (Friedman et al., 2014). Such responses have the potential to further racial disparities by resulting in denial of personal relevance, fatalism, or distancing from the message source.

To mitigate these negative effects, Hetey and Eberhardt (2018) suggest that communicators provide context on what produces the disparities to prevent victim blaming and to emphasize the role that institutions can play in not just perpetuating inequality, but also reducing it. One climate coalition that has effectively exemplified these recommendations is New York Renews, a coalition of more than 300 environmental, justice, faith, labor, and community groups that released a report explaining many of the factors that result in disproportionate climate risks and the need for specific policies to enhance community resilience, which spurred passage of the state's landmark Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (Swernoff, 2019).

Framing climate justice policies as reducing disadvantage (vs. increasing advantage) or ensuring equitable allocation of benefits (vs. harms) may also help to broaden support for these policies (Dietze & Craig, 2021; Makov et al., 2020). For instance, Americans show greater support for reducing economic inequality when it is framed as lower-class disadvantage versus upper-class advantage (Dietze & Craig, 2021). Additionally, communications that highlight group inequities might make promoting agency an explicit focus of messaging and offer tangible solutions to help reassure individuals that, together, they have personal and collective agency to overcome disparities (Friedman et al., 2014).

Knowledge Gaps and Future Directions

Although existing diversity science and communication scholarship offers a useful starting point for considering factors that may impede the growth of diverse climate coalitions, key gaps remain. First, there is a need to consider what counts as climate engagement in the eyes

of researchers, practitioners, and different segments of the public (see Brulle, 2010). What types of collective behaviors do researchers and practitioners intend to appeal to or promote?

Similarly, what counts as climate activism, and how might public perceptions of activism differ among racial and ethnic majority and minority groups and socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged groups? To the extent groups fundamentally differ in how they conceptualize these terms, collective action that bridges differences may be difficult to achieve.

Future studies might also productively explore which identity dimensions matter for environmental engagement. Appealing to social identities that transcend racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences, such as through religious, familial, or cultural identities may be one strategy for diversifying climate coalitions. Indeed, appeals to religious identities have shown some promise in promoting climate change beliefs among Christians by bolstering perceptions of environmental protection as a religious/moral issue (Goldberg et al., 2019). Similarly, appeals to parental identities and the protection of young children, such as through the non-partisan *sciencemoms.com* advertising campaigns, may be effective in building broad, bipartisan coalitions (see Diamond, 2020).

To date, research on identity and climate change opinion has tended to focus on singular identities despite the fact that many people hold multiple consequential and sometimes conflicting identities that may produce differing responses to identity and equity-based appeals. For instance, Muslims in the Kashmir region of India share a religious identity with Pakistan and a national identity with India. Similar overlapping identities can be found in many other social contexts (e.g., among immigrants, refugees, multiethnic individuals, mixed ideology partisans), raising questions about how those with multiple identities, including both recipients and messengers, respond to and influence the impact of diversity messages, and whether highlighting multiple identities might enhance or impede coalition-building (Levy et al., 2017). For example,

examining how practice identities (e.g., veganism) intersect with demographic (e.g., gender) or partisan identities, and the barriers posed by their strictly defined behavioral practices, may reveal additional obstacles diverse organizations face in building diverse and durable coalitions to address climate change (Kurz et al., 2020). More research would thus be valuable examining which identities compete versus align and how to make pro-environmental organizations and behaviors more welcoming and inclusive in ways that may facilitate coalition building.

Given the rapid growth of protest movements and imagery in news media within the United States and abroad, understanding the effects of protest imagery is another important and understudied direction for climate researchers. Climate strikes are now one of the most common collective action tactics globally (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021); yet, some studies have documented public negativity toward images depicting climate demonstrations (Chapman et al., 2016). This research suggests imagery conveying people impacted by climate change may be more compelling than images of protestors, which may resonate more strongly with those identifying as activists (Wang et al., 2018). Nevertheless, protests can also produce positive feelings of solidarity and collective efficacy. For example, one study found that student demonstrators who felt a shared sense of identity reported stronger feelings of positive affect, connectedness, and validation of their beliefs and behaviors (Neville & Reicher, 2011), a finding that has been extended to youth climate strikers (Lee et al., 2022). Protests can also mobilize collective action by signaling a norm of shared public outrage, which can increase engagement with climate initiatives (Sabherwal et al., 2021). Further research is thus needed to determine when and how protests and other forms of climate activism inspire or impede broader public mobilization.

Although our recommendations can help practitioners craft identity-based climate messaging to engage broader audiences, we recognize messaging alone can only take us so far and is unlikely to meet Brulle's (2010) call for enhancing "political mobilization capacity"

required for addressing climate change. Nevertheless, communication remains an important lever of social change, from overcoming political disagreements to initiating difficult conversations about how to address the current and looming threat of climate change and the inequities it produces and reproduces.

Addressing these challenges will require coalitions that include groups disproportionately affected by climate change as well as those with resources and existing social, economic, and political capacity to facilitate social change. For organizations looking to build these types of coalitions, questioning underlying assumptions that may guide even well-intentioned outreach and advocacy efforts is critical to fostering intergroup trust needed to sustain these coalitions. By testing these assumptions in partnership with environmental organizations, government agencies, and community organizations using tools and insights from diversity science, researchers and practitioners can work together to build a more impactful and generalizable knowledge base that can help to create a more just, inclusive, and effective climate movement.

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Table 1

Pitfalls and Prescriptions for Identity and Equity-Based Communications

Pitfalls	Potential Alternative Approaches
<p>Problematic Assumption 1: Pro-diversity messaging is viewed as equitable and inclusive by both racial-ethnic majority and minority groups.</p>	
<p><u>Racial-ethnic majority groups:</u> Diversity messaging can be perceived as unfair, reduce sensitivity to injustice, and create feelings of threat and exclusion (Dover et al., 2020; also see Leslie, 2018).</p> <p><u>Racial-ethnic minority groups:</u> Diversity messaging can create false promises and suggest that they need help to succeed (Dover et al., 2020; also see Leslie, 2018).</p>	<p>Emphasize procedural fairness (Dover et al., 2020)</p> <p>Acknowledge both a shared common identity and the value of subgroup identities within the organization (Dovidio et al., 2016)</p> <p>"Show" (e.g., demographic representation) rather than "tell" (e.g., inclusive values) organizational diversity (Wilton et al., 2020)</p> <p>If an organization lacks diversity, focus on other aspects of the job or workplace that are desirable (McKay & Avery, 2005)</p>
<p>Problematic Assumption 2: Making specific identity groups salient will engage members of these groups.</p>	
<p>Environmental identity cues (e.g., “environmentalist”) can activate stereotypes among underrepresented groups (Pearson et al., 2018) and reinforce them through a process of subtyping (Park et al., 2001).</p>	<p>Analytic deliberation to enhance civic engagement (Phadke et al., 2015)</p> <p>Include representation of both racial-ethnic majority and minority groups in communications, especially if focused on justice initiatives (Iyer & Achia, 2020; Saguy et al., 2020)</p>
<p>Problematic Assumption 3: Conveying climate-related inequities enhances public support for efforts to reduce those inequities among both advantaged and disadvantaged groups.</p>	
<p><u>Advantaged groups:</u> Reminders of racial disparities can prompt people to justify systems that produce those disparities (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014).</p> <p><u>Disadvantaged groups:</u> Revealing racial disparities can produce negative emotions and reduce engagement (Nicholson et al., 2008).</p>	<p>Give context on the disparities to prevent victim blaming and highlight the positive role of institutions in combating inequities (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018)</p> <p>Frame messaging about justice policies as reducing disadvantage (vs advantage) or allocating benefits (vs harms; Dietze & Craig, 2020; Makov et al., 2020)</p> <p>Make promoting agency an explicit focus of communications by offering tangible actions or solutions (Friedman et al., 2014)</p>

