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Title: The (Mis)Perception of Social Norms in Dynamic Social Networks

Keywords: agent-based model, cooperation, contentiousness, dynamic networks, misperceptions, norm-network interaction

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Description:

This project aims to better understand the bidirectional relation between society's social fabric – mainly in terms of social relations between people – and the divergence or convergence of norms on climate-change-related behavior. Which relations are under pressure because people think differently about how to contribute to social problems such as the climate crisis? Might these threats to the social fabric be more serious because we are not very well informed about the norms and behaviors of others? Therefore, we focus on building theoretical models for situations in which misperceptions of norms are likely. We want to test these models using experimental research.

There has been considerable theoretical and empirical work on the co-evolution of coordination behavior in networks (De Matos Fernandes et al., 2025). While such studies typically assume that actors accurately observe the behavior of all others, in many situations, individuals do not accurately perceive a norm. Upon misperceiving a social norm, individuals might start to feel less aligned with the group. This is a danger to social cohesion, especially because norms and networks show some form of co-evolution, meaning that the perceived norm shapes the network (and vice versa).

We aim to contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, we will more explicitly take into account that the behavior of others or norms on a certain behavior are not straightforwardly observable by people. Second, we want to zoom in on micro-mechanisms involved in how people infer what the social norm might be from the information they have about others, adding more social-psychological mechanisms. Third, we aim to understand in what way the mechanisms of norm (mis)perception can help or hinder community-based interventions in the climate domain. The findings of the more fundamental components of this project will help tailor interventions in a specific context and highlight the extent to which individuals have an accurate or inaccurate perception of support for climate change measures in their community. This will help develop intervention strategies that specifically target the difference in perceptions, aiming to correct potential biases.